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Jews and Judaism between Bedevilment and Source of Salvation: Christianity as a Cause of and a Cure against Antisemitism

The phenomenon of antisemitism employs powerful, appalling, and strangely consistent imagery across cultures and down through time, to associate Jews and Judaism with the devil. Accusations of demonic alliances—and images of “the Jews” as demonic entities—appear in diverse antisemitic contexts, which might be Christian, Muslim, or “secular” and which manifest distinct versions of a consistent underlying pattern.

What gives life to this cultural formation, and why does it continue so vibrantly, even in social settings where Jews and Judaism are not themselves to be found?

In light of treatments of antisemitism that focus on its varying content, and especially in light of distinctions that have been made between religious anti-Judaism and racial antisemitism,¹ our attention to the demonization of the Jews seeks to reframe a basic premise of the argument. By understanding antisemitic tropes as cross-communal cultural formations, reliant on cultural memory and transmitted across social barriers, we seek to understand antisemitism itself as a “religion,” one whose tenets can easily be integrated into other worldviews or religious formations.

It is the “religious” nature of antisemitism that renders it powerful and gives it vibrancy across time and culture. This religious nature is also what makes antisemitism so difficult to battle. Close attention to antisemitism as religion thus offers opportunities to think in new ways about how to undercut its potency and further develop effective strategies to restrain, combat, and end it.

¹ This paper joins an extensive conversation on the origins of antisemitism. For an overview of key arguments, with extensive bibliography, see René Bloch, “Ancient Anti-Semitism,” in *Oxford Bibliographies*, last modified November 28, 2016, accessed May 9, 2019, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0140.xml>; Key treatments of ancient antisemitism include esp. J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

1 Introduction

Philosophers observe that cognition is guided by antecedent ideas and that cognition about particular objects relates back to prior experience or assumptions about them. The phenomenon of antecedent ideas is illustrated by the following joke:

What is the difference between an English pensioner, a French pensioner, and a German pensioner?

The English pensioner reads *The Times* while eating breakfast and then goes to the golf club.

The French pensioner drinks a glass of wine for breakfast.

And the German pensioner takes a blood pressure tablet and sets off to work.²

This brief joke clearly illustrates the role of prejudice in shaping our perceptions of our counterparts. Stereotypes about British, French, and German cultural norms shape this joke. Whether a hearer finds the joke funny or not, what makes it possible is the presence of generalized categories that facilitate understanding through the use of antecedent ideas.

It was Karl Jaspers who pointed to the insurmountable divide between the understanding subject and the object of understanding, or what might be classified as the subject-object divide. I, as a subject, view another person as an object of my understanding. To achieve cognition of this object, my preconceptions—based on cultural or religious memories, prior experiences, and things I have seen or been told—equip me to draw conclusions without attention to specifics. Thus, for the joke to work, listeners must already assume—or know that some people around them assume—that all Germans are workaholics.

Preconceptions based on prior experience are not necessarily bad.³ The assumption that it is dangerous to drive through an intersection when the light is red, because we have seen other people do this (or done so ourselves), is a prod-

² Adapted from “Top 20 German Jokes: Translated into English,” accessed May 9, 2019, <http://www.learn-german-language-online.com/german-jokes.html>. Except as noted below, all web-sites were last accessed on May 9, 2019.

³ Gadamer controversially argued for the value of a concept he identified as “prejudice” (*Vorurteil*) in his classic of hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode* (in English, see H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed. [London: Continuum, 1989], 267–304). The implications of this understanding of prejudice were addressed in a series of publications (the “Gadamer-Habermas Debate”), selected and published with other resources in K.-O. Apel, *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); see also P. Ricoeur, “Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue,” *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973): 153–65.

uct of past experience that can keep us, and the drivers around us, safe and out of trouble.

In interpersonal engagements, preconceptions underlie our earliest rounds of communication, in which we experience an unfamiliar Other—sympathetically or not—as an object of understanding and cognition. Such preconceptions are a given in any interaction, but they have the capacity to become almost instantly problematic, if a prior sense of understanding is treated as an objective and comprehensive truth, unchangeable in the face of new evidence for the ordinary complexities of lived experience.

In light of these observations with regard to preconceptions, this paper considers the question of the extent to which Christian religious texts form and transmit negative antecedent ideas of Jews and Judaism, which in turn may determine or provide support for antisemitic perceptions of the Jewish Other.

As we will argue below, antisemitic prejudices and the fixed understandings they generate contribute to the cultivation of a symbolic system that is so potent and self-enforcing—if in addition so irrational—that it provides an antisemitic believer with a nearly unbreakable Truth, a paradigm of Jew-hatred as religious conviction.

2 Antisemitism, Religion, and Cultural Memory

With particular attention to the Bible and Christianity, we wish to ask to what extent the demonization of Jews and Judaism in Christian literature contributes to an antisemitic fervor that is best understood as a *religion* of Jew-hatred.

The examples in this paper are drawn from a variety of historical contexts, from antiquity to the contemporary. While they are constituent to the texts in question and provide a backdrop for an understanding of Christian antisemitism, they should not be viewed as implying either that all Christians are antisemitic or that all antisemites are Christian. Rather, one of our claims will be that the ideas generated in any one set of antisemitic arguments take on a veil of objectivity that allows them to carry weight far outside of their original context. This, indeed, is one of the dynamics that allows antisemitism to resurface repeatedly, often at apparent remove from any visible external influences.

Classic scholarly treatments of religion note its capacity to shape order out of chaos, creating meaning that is powerful for its adherents. Mircea Eliade, for ex-

ample, understands the sacred as a force that turns chaos into cosmos, by creating identifiable religious spheres of experience and meaning.⁴

Anthropologists, responding to and critiquing Eliade's phenomenological appreciation of the sacred, have especially recognized the powerful cultural formations that undergird any notion of religious Truth. Clifford Geertz defines religion precisely in terms of its apparent objectivity and its capacity for creating a sense of "the real" among its adherents.

Although scholars have critiqued Geertz's approach to religion, especially his emphasis on its systemic and systematic qualities, this very sense of system can be helpful for a clearer understanding of the potency of antisemitic thought. Geertz describes a religion as:

(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁵

Further consideration of these premises will provide a useful backdrop for certain points we wish to argue.

Note, first, Geertz's presentation of religion as "a system of symbols." The implication here is far-reaching and reflects Geertz's focus on culture and its layering of meaning. Geertz treats cultural formations as both a "model of" human experience—one that represents and reflects back on itself—and a "model for" future constructions of it.⁶ Culture is thus both received by and the product of humans and their creativity in a given historical moment. The concept of "culture," in this light, indicates for Geertz a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms." By means of this formation, people can then "communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."⁷

The founding myths of a religious community, its history, authority-structure, ritual practices, music, art, and specialized language all contribute "sym-

4 M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959), 29–30.

5 C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4. Extensive critiques of this approach have been articulated in T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

6 Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 7.

7 Ibid., 3.

bols” of the sort that Geertz identifies as building-blocks of religious cultural formation. To the extent that multiple religions share a common history and geography, they will also partake of a shared corpus of symbols. One might think here of the spring holiday in which a lamb is sacrificed in order to rescue an enslaved people and provide them with a new covenant of salvation. The symbols—blood, lamb, sacrifice, covenant—are shared, but the systems (which differently underlie the Passover of Jewish tradition and the Easter of Christianity) may both differ from and compete with one another in claims for authenticity. Common religious symbols (cleansing in water, anointing the dead) may arise out of historical contact and influence, but they may also be the independent products of unrelated parallels; their significance will depend upon how they are integrated into a given tradition (the “system”) as a whole.

In addition to his trademark appreciation for “thick description,” Geertz also highlights an important and often under-recognized phenomenon: the emotional power of religious systems. William James, of course, emphasizes the emotional impact of religious experience,⁸ but Geertz’s contribution takes a different tack, by acknowledging the two-part dynamic of “moods” (emotional states) and “motivations” (mental states that encourage action, change, or a particular set of thoughts). Geertz also distinguishes between fleeting emotional or intentional states and those that have long-lasting effect. The mental-emotional experience of a religious symbol system can have, as Geertz asserts, “long-lasting” effects, that are not only hard to escape but in fact hard to *want* to escape. Religious symbol systems are effective because they push our buttons, and they lead us to think that this is both a normal and a desirable reality.

Geertz’s definition further claims that religious symbol systems postulate a “general order of existence” that is clothed in “an aura of factuality.” Such a claim can render readers remarkably uncomfortable. In an introduction to a religious studies class, only a few brave students, when pushed to clarify their objections to Geertz’s assertions, will say, “Geertz seems to be saying that religion *isn’t* real, but is only pretending to be, that religious realities don’t really exist but just claim to.” They are rarely happy to have their perceptions confirmed.

But Geertz’s point remains a vital one, particularly when we turn to a discussion of antisemitism, because the very point of religion, according to this definition, is that it is at once utterly convincing and at the same time grounded in a logic that is only susceptible to confirmation within its own cognitive frame. The long-lasting moods and motivations of a given religion or religious symbol sys-

⁸ Cf. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, translated and reprinted for Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

tem are a product of the aura of factuality articulated by it. The efficacy of any religion, according to this definition, lies in its power to convince.

Geertz's definition concludes with attention to religious exclusivism, which again will be an important component in our discussion of antisemitism.⁹ The convincing power of religion—and especially of monotheistic religions—lies in the assertion of reality, indeed of a unique reality.

Religion thus makes people feel. It makes people act on their feelings. And it leads people to believe that their feelings and actions are confirmed objectively by the evidence around them, which includes a system of symbols so convincing that they can be understood as entirely—indeed, uniquely—credible.

Disproving any such symbol system is far from easy and hardly accomplished through rational argumentation alone. It requires unraveling the system, demonstrating not only that it is not unique, or even real, but that its very potent symbols have created false feelings and false perceptions. It entails convincing a person that his or her fundamental understanding of the universe is misplaced.

It is possible to convince people to abandon strongly-held religious views—by providing evidence, offering an alternative value system, or emphasizing the doubts the person might already have—but by their very nature, such views are easier to retain than to dismiss. This should serve as an indicator of one reason why antisemitism retains its staying power over time and geographic distance.

Religions, as symbol systems, are also potent in their specificity: myths, belief structures, sacred texts, and ritual practices contribute large quantities of data (in the form of everything from literary characters to food smells to the physical shape of a sacred object) which together are preserved in the corpus of cultural memory. Exposure to the troves of cultural memory, often from earliest childhood, reinforces for its participants the unique plausibility of the symbol system, by grounding it in specific images and stereotypes, as well as particular narratives that define truth and value, good and evil.

Cultural memory, scholars have noted, externalizes and objectifies particular components of a given culture.¹⁰ An individual's experience (of a moment of grace, for example, or the exposure to wickedness) contributes to that individu-

⁹ On religious exclusivism, see D. Eck, "Is Our God Listening?" Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism," in *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, ed. D. Eck (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 166–99.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 109–18. Assmann distinguishes between cultural memory, as preserved in texts and other externalized evidence, and collective memory, which Halbwachs frames as limited by a shared lived experience of three successive generations, or roughly eighty years; see Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 111.

al's ongoing preconceptions of the world. The collection of "past experiences" of this sort in the context of cultural memory—written, illustrated, or handed down orally—similarly creates a pool of "past experiences" that individuals can claim as their own. That these experiences are not literally "one's own" might appear to render them less potent, but in practice the opposite is true: the externalization of themes or images in cultural memory renders them *more* potent, in that they take on "an aura of factuality," an objectivity, which arises specifically in light of their coming from the "outside" of a person's own experience.

As Aleida Assmann so powerfully observes,

Through culture, humans create a temporal framework that transcends the individual life span relating past, present, and future. Cultures create a contract between the living, the dead, and the not yet living. In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning-production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret.¹¹

Aleida Assmann's observation that cultural memory creates a contract between past and future is important for our argument. It is not only, as Geertz observes, that symbol systems call upon people to think and feel in particular ways and that these thoughts and feelings have significant staying power. Even more significantly, Aleida Assmann has demonstrated, cultural memory generates a moral compulsion—individual experience of the collective past implicates those later generations. The evidence from the past *requires* something of them, that they listen and engage with those externalized—that is, "real" and authoritative—claims from past times.¹²

Even as Assmann notes the potency of cultural memory, she does not imagine later generations as passive recipients of it. To the contrary, the very act of engaging with the past must include critique and comment. Assmann speaks of active and passive forgetting as dynamics that can accompany exposure to cultural memory, and she distinguishes between two central concepts: the canon of active memory, and the archive of memories set aside, preserved for their potential relevance to lived experience but not imbued with authoritative value.¹³

¹¹ A. Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 97.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Cultural memory serves as a starting point for understanding the potency of antisemitic thought and also for responding to it. To the extent that antisemitic cultural formations (arising from biblical and non-biblical sources and preserved and expanded through history) are externalized as authentic responses to the eternal “problem” of the Jews, they hold moral sway over their recipients. But this claim to authority does not exist in isolation, and Assmann points toward a variety of available responses: active critique, struggle, and head-on engagement.¹⁴ In light of such options, it may be possible to de-authorize received antisemitic tradition, effectively to “decanonize” it and relocate it in a separate framing, as received, archived, problematic memory but not as authoritative truth.¹⁵

Antisemitic cultural formations—arising from biblical and non-biblical ancient sources—preserve specific and detailed motifs or memes, which are available to successive generations irrespective of their personal connections to one another. Central among them—and central motifs for the discussion that follows—include stereotypes of Jews as destroyers of truth, who suppress the true messianic message of their own Bible, while manifesting as demonic antitheses to God’s chosen people.

Doctrinaire antisemite Rudolf Hess provides fascinating evidence for an antisemitic symbol-system that lines up with Geertz’s definition of religion. Hess framed his own acceptance of an antisemitic outlook explicitly in terms of a conversion narrative. In a speech he gave on May 14, 1935, for the German-Swedish society in Stockholm, he stated:

I myself was until then not an antisemite, but on the contrary defended the Jews based on the usual historical theory against their adversaries and persecutors. The facts of 1918 and later were so eye-catching that I was forced to *convert* to antisemitism, even though inwardly I was rather reluctant to revise my hitherto conviction about the innocence of persecuted Judaism.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Contemporary discussions around memorialization of the U.S. Civil War provide an apt parallel here. A long history of active memorialization of the Confederacy (especially around the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War and again, even more perniciously, during the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century) has created a cultural landscape of monuments, memorials, and named institutions whose future is a topic of significant public debate.

¹⁶ Translation and emphasis by the authors of this article: “Ich selbst war bis dahin kein Antisemit, sondern nahm in Gegenteil auf Grund der üblichen Geschichtslehre die Juden gegenüber ihren Widersachern und Verfolgern in Schutz. Die Tatsachen von 1918 und später waren aber so in die Augen springend, daß ich mich zum Antisemitismus *bekehren* mußte, so sehr ich mich auch innerlich dagegen sträubte, meine bisherige Überzeugung von der Unschuld des verfolgten Judentums berichtigen zu müssen.” Rudolph Hess, “An die Ausländer guten Willens,” in *Reden*, ed. Rudolf Hess (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Nachf., 1938), 104. A strikingly

Several points here deserve attention. First, Hess views his experience as a movement from one belief system to another; he initially defended the Jews but was later “forced” to change his perspective. His observation that he was initially reluctant to change his perspective lines up with Geertz’s view that religious systems not only appear uniquely real to their followers but also that they create long-lasting motivations. Hess frames his initial view in terms of a *desire* to believe in the innocence of the Jewish people against their persecutors, and he claims that it has taken a lot to change his views.

In the case of Hess, too, we notice that he claims to have made his conversion by rational means: the introduction of evidence that is to his mind new and convincing leads him to analyze his previous understanding of the Jews and to find it inaccurate. But we would argue that this language of rationality actually covers over a much less rational thought-process. His sense that “the facts of 1918 and later were so *eye-catching*” suggests that they captured his thought process emotionally, that they led him from one set of long-lasting perceptions to a very different set. This is not a process of rational education, but rather one of emotional—religious—transformation.

Hess’ language of conversion is even stronger in the original German than in the English translation. It demonstrates that Hess perceived or at least framed his own antisemitism as a religion. After all, he “converted” to it.

The “powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations” of anti-semitism are evident in its many historical iterations, from Hecataios and Manetho in the third century BCE, down to the present day. They contribute to slanderous views of Jews that not only claim factuality but take on an uncorrectable conviction, which in turn generates a remarkably flexible, long-lived religious credo: that Jews are evil and destroy anything that is good.

Returning momentarily to the problem of preconception, we should remember that especially in situations of crisis, communities consider the Other, the stranger, as a foreign object that is threatening in its very existence. Religious symbol systems provide contexts for understanding these treacherous Others, enabling their adherents to create a sense of stability in the midst of chaos and also to define and confirm their own identity, through rejection of the

similar example appears in a recent article in the New Yorker, which explores the intellectual development of Mike Enoch, an American white supremacist. He describes attending a meeting with Jewish political activists: “An overwhelming sense of loathing washed over me like an awesome wave [...] the people I was around suddenly seemed twisted and horrible. A revelatory religious experience is the closest thing I can compare this experience to.” See A. Marantz, “Birth of a Supremacist,” *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/birth-of-a-white-supremacist>.

Other. In times of economic crisis, it is, for instance, much easier to hold the collective Jew as the paradigmatic Other responsible for an economic catastrophe than to direct blame on the less immediately-visible systems and decision-makers who are specifically at fault. Crises are thus catalysts, not only for change, but also for continuity and revisiting of negative prejudices with respect to the Jewish Other.

Christianity is not, as such, to blame for this situation. The current pope, in his greeting to the conference “An End to Antisemitism!” provides an impressive example that there can be a Christianity without Jew-hatred. But it cannot be denied that even fundamental Christian texts provide the resources for a religious memory that cultivates and communicates a particular religious symbol system characterized by hatred of Jews.

An antisemitic symbol system grounded in the texts of early Christianity has provided and continues to provide antisemitic believers with preconceived interpretive grids that are especially reassuring in situations of crisis. Among these preconceived interpretive grids are dualistic symbol systems that distinguish the subjects who perceive (Christian partakers of God’s truth) and the objects that are perceived (the Jews, as denizens of a negative other-world). Christian texts provide language for envisioning the Jews as the sons of the devil, who conspire to murder and destroy anything of positive value.

Hatred of Jews is not a product of the specific moments in which Christian texts have been written, although those moments and those texts have contributed to the symbol system of antisemitism. Rather, it is the transmission of those texts and symbols, over centuries and millennia, in highly specific and at times highly diverse social contexts that has allowed for the continuity of antisemitic messages. The individual claims of Christian texts, re-read and reconsidered by successive generations of Christians—and further claimed and transformed by Muslims and post-Christian antisemites—provide one engine that allows antisemitism to flourish. Religious disciples of antisemitism read their own reality in light of the symbol systems that Christianity (and Islam) have transmitted, and this in turn creates a context in which they can blame the collective Jew for any and all failings around them.

3 The Bedevilment of Jews in (Late) Ancient Christianity

Our first sample text comes from the Gospel of John. As the latest of the four canonical gospels, John often presents exacerbated versions of the early Christian

ideas that came before him. Thus, in its treatment of conflicts between Jesus and “the Jews” (as if Jesus himself were not a Jew throughout his life), the Gospel of John escalates the fictional conflict even more than the synoptics did in their earlier presentations. John’s treatment of this account is unique in its claims that the Jews plotted to murder Jesus (John 7:1–3; 8:20–47) and in fact attempted to do so unsuccessfully two times (John 8:48–59; 10:22–30). The peak of this narrative plot is the passion story, which is of profound importance to so many believing Christians. Christians and other readers of the gospel thus absorb, at this most intense narrative point, the slanderous claim that the Jews as a collectivity would have killed Jesus.

The narrative plot of an escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jews in the gospel of John has nothing to do with historical reality. It is a means by which the author of the gospel unfolds an antithesis defining Christian identity in opposition to a negative otherworld. This is particularly evident in the infamous account in John 8.

37 “I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. 38 I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.” 39 They (the Jews) answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, 40 but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.” 42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. 44 *You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.* He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.”¹⁷

The Gospel of John presents a sharp and clear duality here, between the historical people of the Jews and the Christians who will replace them.¹⁸ The historical Jewish people are depicted as representatives of the devil, who reject the truth of

¹⁷ Translations of the New Testament are according to NRSV.

¹⁸ See in particular A. Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000*, ed. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 213–30.

the Johannine gospel and hence murder Jesus. Christianity, in this formulation, is the representative of the positive pole of a dualistic universe and Judaism is the negative. The Johannine gospel thereby severs any ties between Christianity and Judaism, defining Christian identity and Christians in opposition with Judaism, by means of slander and Jew-hatred.

In this process, the Gospel of John takes ownership of and transforms the religious symbol of “the Jews.” No longer understood as the keepers of God’s covenant, “the Jews” of this gospel are instead preserved in the cultural memory of nascent Christianity as followers of a demonic deity. Erasing the Jewishness of Jesus, of the disciples, and of much of the early church, John’s dualistic worldview creates a bedeviled Other in “the Jews” of the negative otherworld, the opponents of positive Christianity.

The impact of the Gospel of John is evident at various points in Christian history, nowhere more vividly than in the sermons of John Chrysostom. In the years 386–387 CE, Chrysostom gave eight sermons *Adversus Judaeos* in the city of Antioch. These sermons were intended to respond to a problem in Chrysostom’s parish, that a significant number of his flock were participating in synagogue services, celebrating Jewish festivals, and observing Jewish fasting. Chrysostom’s sermons treat this Christian fascination with Judaism as a danger not only for the so-called Judaizing Christians but in fact for Christianity itself.

Like the Gospel of John, then, Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of separations between Jews and Christians and the incompatibility of their two religious systems. His response is not a mild criticism of those Christians that are fascinated with Judaism but an attack on Jews that includes condemnation, abuse, and outright slander. The Jews, says Chrysostom, are “pigs” and “goats” (I:4,1), a “pack of hunting dogs” (II:4), and many other things. Christians are wrong to engage with them but are excused for their misbehavior and assured of clemency and acceptance upon their return.

Chrysostom’s dualistic view treats Jews and Christians not only as opposites in a worldview of good and evil but as inhabitants of entirely separate realms, one heavenly and the other satanic. Jews are robbers of the soul, and the synagogue is a dwelling place of demons (I:3,3). The devil seduces Christians to go there (I:3,5), and once they have crossed the threshold, they enter a realm of evil where only the sign of the cross can protect them.

But now you see your own brother being dragged off unjustly to the depth of destruction. And it is not the executioner who drags him off, but the devil ... If he will stand fast in his obstinate resolve, I shall choose to risk my life rather than let him enter the doors of the synagogue. (*Adv. Jud.* I:4,6)

But how will you go into the synagogue? If you make the sign of the cross on your forehead, the evil power that dwells in the synagogue immediately takes to flight. If you fail to sign your forehead, you have immediately thrown away your weapon at the doors. Then the devil will lay hold of you, naked and unarmed as you are, and he will overwhelm you with ten thousand terrible wounds. (*Adv. Jud.* VIII:8,7)

Chrysostom's slander of the Jews not only resembles the Gospel of John in its bedeviling language but in fact draws upon the Christian cultural memory that includes John, framing a prejudicial antecedent conception. This conception of the Jew serves equally well to characterize any Christians who pursue a fascination with Judaism. It is this cultural memory on which Chrysostom relies in responding to the crisis of his own diminishing parish.

As a consequence of his slander and his false accusations of deicide, Chrysostom goes much further than the Gospel of John. Chrysostom calls for physical violence against the Jews of Antioch. He tries to instigate the mass murder of all Jews of the city. What Chrysostom asks of his parishioners is nothing less than a late ancient pogrom.

Although such beasts (*scil.* the Jews) are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter. This is why Christ said: "But as for these my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slay them" (Luke 19:27). (*Adv. Jud.* I:2,6)

These excerpts from Chrysostom's sermons against the Jews identify particular motivations for his extreme Jew-hatred. In his eyes, the Christian fascination with things Jewish endangers Christianity. For him, in itself and as the quintessential negative Other, Judaism threatens to taint Christianity by allowing for the intersection of Christian good with Jewish "Evil." In his fear, Chrysostom goes to any length of hatred to respond to that illusionary threat.

The anxieties of the Gospel of John and the sermons of John Chrysostom continue to resonate in antisemitic thought at later historical points. Examples from Medieval, (early) Modern, and Modern times reflect the ongoing potency of these ideas.

4 The Bedevilment of Jews in Medieval and (Early) Modern Christianity

In medieval times, the bedevilment of the Jews became a standard motif, a generally accepted truism of antisemitic polemics, which could be assumed without

explicit argumentation.¹⁹ Examples from medieval Christianity thus demonstrate how an ancient antisemitic religious symbol could become not only a widespread and deeply rooted canard but also a resource for the construction of both the negative Jewish Other and, through its demonization, a contrasting Christian in-group identity.

An example is provided by Agobard of Lyon. Agobard was archbishop of Lyon from 816–840 CE. and was one of the harshest antisemites of the Frankish Empire. In the years 826–829 CE, Agobard wrote five letters against Judaism to different addressees.²⁰ His antisemitic agitation is common in other parts of his oeuvre, too.²¹ With this antisemitic agitation, Agobard responds to policies of King Louis the Pious (813–840 CE) that were favorable towards Jews. Louis' policies allowed Jews to gain positions in which they ruled over Christians, shattering Agobard's understanding that—because of their alleged murder of Jesus of Nazareth—Jews could only exist as servants to Christians.

Confronted with the political realities of the Frankish empire and their challenge to inherited Christian doctrine, Agobard develops in his writings an extensive antisemitic ideology. This belief-structure is deeply grounded in the antisemitic religious symbol system of (late) antiquity.

Agobard's worldview is deeply dualistic and influences his idea of how the political structures of the Frankish empire should be formed. In a treatise against the Burgundian law code, Agobard compares, for example, the Frankish empire with the kingdom of God, which should be clearly demarcated from the kingdom of the devil.

Here truly should be the difference and boundary between kingdom and kingdom, that is, that of Christ and of the devil, the city of God and the city of the devil which constitute two peoples. (*Adversus legem Gundobaldi*, 6)

¹⁹ For a survey, see already J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

²⁰ *Epistola ad proceres Palatii Walam et Hilduin* (to abbots Wala and Hilduin), *Consulatio ad Adalhardem, Walam et Helisachar* (to Adalhard, Wala and Helisachar), *Ad Nibridium* (to bishop Nibridius of Narbonne), *De Insolentia Judaeorum* ("About the Insolence of the Jews," to king Louis the Pious), *De judaïcis superstitionibus* ("About the Superstition of the Jews," written together with bishops Bernhard of Brienne and Eaof of Chalons, synodal letter).

²¹ For Agobard's antisemitism, see J. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 123–45; see also M. G. Minsky, "Agobard and His Relations with the Jews" (MA thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1971); J. Heil, "Agobard, Amolo, das Kirchengut und die Juden von Lyon," *Francia* 25, no. 1 (1998): 39–76; A. B. Langewalter, "Agobard of Lyon: An Exploration of Carolingian Jewish-Christian Relations" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2009).

Agobard argues here to abolish the Burgundian law code, which is framed in terms of class division, in favor of a dualistic social order that distinguishes only between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil.

In his treatise *De cavendo convictu et societate Judaica*, Agobard assigns the Jews of the Frankish Empire to the latter kingdom, employing the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews to establish strict boundaries between Christian and Jewish societies in the political sphere. He further diminishes privileged Jews as “children of the devil” (*diaboli filii*), accusing them of exposing their Christian maids and servants to their diabolic anti-world.

Many women, day maids and others, are employed by them as workers. Not all are perverted, but all by domination, lust, and deception are in some way prostituted in common by the sons of the devil hiding hatred behind fallacious blandishments. They call themselves the progeny of patriarchs ... and the miserable people hear this not knowing that their own prophets were accustomed to call them a nation of sin, a people heavy with iniquity, a worthless seed, polluted children, their father Amorrhoe, their mother Cethee the princess of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah.²²

In Agobard’s worldview, Jews may be permitted to serve Christians but not to rule over them. He thus argues against Jews employing any Christians. In the face of a challenging social reality, in which the alleged Jewish deicides have risen above their menial status to the point of employing Christian maids and servants, Agobard must restate and underscore the assumptions of his Christian identity. To this end, he employs the familiar Johannine religious symbol of the Jews as children of the devil (John 8:44). The appeal to this demonization allows Agobard to reconcile the alienation of his Christian worldview, while removing the Jewish Other from his Christian world into a negative anti-Christian realm.

Agobard is but one example of the long life of this religious symbol of bedevilment. The power of this generally-accepted, widespread, and unquestioned antisemitic canard is further demonstrated by a series of antisemitic caricatures from later centuries.

The first caricature is part of the Forest Roll of the County of Essex in the fifth year of Edward I’s reign (1277).²³ The subject of this caricature is identified by the English version of the Jew-badge as a Jewish man. The caricature accompanies a record about fines imposed on some Jews and Christians who in the year 1267 pursued a doe that had escaped from the hounds during a hunt near Colchester.

²² Quoted according to Minsky, “Agobard and his Relations with the Jews,” 33, 72–73.

²³ 1277 Forest Eyre Roll, TNA/E32/12, rot. 3d. For a discussion of the caricature, see Joseph Jacobs, “Aaron Son of the Devil,” in *Jewish Ideals and Other Essays*, ed. J. Jacobs (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 225, 231–33.

For their poaching—regarded in the thirteenth century as a criminal offense little less than treason—the Christians members of the poachers' group had to pay comparatively small fines, while the Jewish members were fined much higher amounts. One of the Jewish members of the illegal hunting party—named Aaron, son of Leo—escaped to Lincoln and returned some ten years later to Colchester. The caricature might have been made when this Aaron paid his fine after a delay of ten years.

Image 1. Aaron, son of the devil. J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 27.

The scribe who made the caricature included a caption that presents the poacher, Aaron son of Leo, in a familiar light:

Aaron fil(ius) diaboli
Aaron, son of the devil

In the context of thirteenth-century England, such a description of a Jewish person would be an unambiguous reference to the tropes of texts like John 8:44. The use of *diabolo* here is particularly telling, given the Greek and Latin terminology of this biblical text:

- ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ὑμεῖς διαβόλου ἐστ
- vos ex patre diabolo estis (Vulgata)
- You are from your father, the diabolus.

Aaron son of Leo, in this caricature is more than a simple poacher; he is a poacher who is also a Jew. Both he and the rest of his Jewish partners, who were required to pay a higher fine than that assigned to their Christian compatriots, occupy a key antisemitic memory space associated with the bedevilment of the

Jews. Furthermore, the Christian scribe responsible for the demonization of Aaron may be seen as representative of a larger negative attitude towards Jews in England, which resulted in their expulsion in 1290. The Forest Roll of Essex reveals the presence of powerful religious symbols from the Christian cultural memory as potential elements in an attitude toward Jews and Judaism that permitted or supported the argument for their expulsion from the land.

The second example is a mural painting on a bridge tower in Frankfurt am Main close to the entrance of the city's *Judengasse* ("Jewish lane") that was made during the period from 1475 to 1507. The mural depicted a popular iconographic libel known as the Jews' Sow. The bridge tower, a tourist attraction in its day, was demolished in 1801, but the mural is preserved in modern reproductions that remained popular even after its destruction.²⁴ Other representations of similar images can still be found among the medieval and early modern art-works of many German churches.²⁵

The stereotype of the Jews' Sow is among the most disgusting and offensive in the antisemitic visual lexicon: A rabbi rides backwards on a sow, while another rabbi licks its anus, and a third drinks from its teats. Beyond the obvious assaults on sexual and social mores is the use of the pig itself, with the special impurity that it connotes in Jewish tradition.²⁶ The presence of such depictions as decorations in Christian sacral buildings points to the intent of this caricature, to contrast the holiness of the sacred Christian ritual of the Eucharist with an obscene and profane representation of an imagined Jewish counter-ritual.²⁷ Thus, the Christian sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is here contrasted with the alleged "Schleck- und Dreck-Sakrament" of Judaism.²⁸

²⁴ See G. von Graevenitz, S. Rieger, F. Thürlemann, eds., *Die Unvermeidlichkeit der Bilder* (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 2001), 109; E. Fuchs, *Die Juden in der Karikatur: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte* (Bremen: Dogma, 2013), 31; R. Kreis, "Die christliche Bildwelt und der Antisemitismus aus der Gegensicht Kafkas," in *Die Unvermeidlichkeit der Bilder*, ed. G. von Graevenitz, S. Rieger, and F. Thürlemann (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2001), 109.

²⁵ For the Jews' Sow motif, see I. Shachar: *The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and its History* (London: Warburg Institute, 1974); E. Fuchs, *Die Juden in der Karikatur*, 114–22; Th. Bruinier, *Die 'Judensau': Zu einem Symbol des Judenhasses und seiner Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag Breitsohl, 1995), 4–15; H. Schreckenberg, *Die Juden in der Kunst Europas: Ein historischer Bildatlas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 343–49; H. Schreckenberg, *Christliche Adversus-Judaeos-Bilder: Das Alte und Neue Testament im Spiegel der christlichen Kunst* (Wien: Lang, 1999).

²⁶ Cf. Fuchs, *Die Juden in der Karikatur*, 120–21.

²⁷ Similar Kreis, "Die christliche Bildwelt und der Antisemitismus aus der Gegensicht Kafkas," 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.* The German phrase means "lapping- and dirt sacrament." Translation by the authors of this article.

Image 2. *The Frankfurt Jews' Sow*, copperplate 18th c., taken from the Bridge Towers of Frankfurt's "Alte Brücke."

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Judensau_Frankfurt.jpg, accessed June 3, 2019.

But the Frankfurt mural introduces two new elements into the familiar motif of the Jews' Sow, which further emphasize the contradistinction between Jewish and Christian religiosity. (1) Above the Jews' Sow, the Frankfurt mural depicts the alleged ritual murder of Simon of Trent. (2) Next to the Jews' Sow stands a devil, while behind the sow a woman rides a billy goat (the latter a sexual symbol of

the devil). By way of this dual diabolic iconography, the Frankfurt Jews' Sow mural questions the very humanity of the Jews, who are otherwise under demonic rule in all things.

The combination of this perverse set up with the violated body of the child Simon intends to emphasize the impression of Jewish abnormality. Their (*scil.* the Jews') animalistic-infantile sexuality and their obscenity leaning towards coprophagy and sodomy are intended to raise doubts whether they are human beings at all.²⁹

But the religious meaning of the Frankfurt Jews' Sow is not restricted to a contradistinction between Jewish and Christian ritual. Taken together, the antisemitic religious symbols of the Jews' Sow and the bedevilment of the Jews create a firm distinction between the world of Christianity and the Satanic otherworld in which all Jews must dwell. The placement of the sign, near the entrance to the Frankfurt Ghetto further identifies it as a diabolic realm. Like John Chrysostom's antisemitic agitation, the mural draws on symbols from Christian cultural memory to provide a clear distinction for Frankfurt's Christians, between their own positive group identity and the realm of the bedeviled Jew.

The third caricature is by Matthew Darly, a famous and very successful caricaturist of eighteenth-century England.³⁰ Entitled "The Masquerade Dance," it was published on December 8, 1771, and shows six men—a friar, a Jew, a Quaker(?), a Turk, a Muslim, and a bishop—dancing to a devil's tune.³¹

29 Ibid. The German original of the quote is: "Die Kombination dieser perversen Gruppierung mit dem geschändeten Leib des Kindes Simon soll den Eindruck jüdischer Abartigkeit verstärken. Ihre tierhaft-infantile Sexualität und ihre der Koprophagie und Sodomie zugeordnete Obszönität sollen Zweifel schüren, ob sie überhaupt Menschen sind." English translation by the authors of this article.

30 For Matthew Darly, see H. M. Atherton, *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth: A Study of the Ideographic Representation of Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 18; M. Bryant, *Dictionary of British Cartoonists and Caricaturists: 1730–1980* (London: Lund Humphries, 1994), 54; H. J. Stroomberg, "Matthew en Mary Darly: Graveurs, uitgevers en verkopers van prenten in London 1748–1781," *Die Boekenwereld* 13 (1996–1997): 229–41; A. Rasche and G. Wolter, *Ridikül! Mode in der Karikatur: 1600 bis 1900* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2003), 42; and "Matthew Darly (Biographical Details)," *The British Museum*, accessed May 9, 2019, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioId=127680.

31 For descriptions of this caricature, see F. G. Stephens, *Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Division 1: Political and Personal Satires*, vol. 4: A.D. 1761 to c. A.D. 1770 (London: British Museum, 1883), 761 (no. 4635); F. Felsenstein and Sh. Liberman Mintz, *The Jew as Other: A Century of English Caricature: 1730–1830: An Exhibition: April 6–July 31, 1995* (New York: The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1995), 42; "Collection Online: The Masquerade Dance," *The British Museum*, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/re>

Image 3. Matthew Daryl, *The Masquerade Dance*, etching, 1771.

Source: The British Museum Image Gallery, Museum Nr. 1865,0610.1104. https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=298482001&objectid=1642319, accessed June 3, 2019.

This etching represents a “visual echo of the phrase ‘Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics’, first found in 1548 in the Book of Common Prayer, and recurrent as a general term of abuse throughout the eighteenth century.”³² This clustering of “undesirable” religious entities—outside Christianity or heretical to a particular set of Christian norms—is not unusual in medieval and early modern polemics. Muslims and Catholics are often attacked side by side with Jews in Protestant antisemitic agitation. But the explicit demonization of these religious Others, who dance to the devil’s song, emphasizes their outsider status and evil intents. Daryl’s treatment of the Jews, and other Others, here represents yet another ex-

search/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=384375001&objectId=1642319&partId=1; “The Masquerade Dance,” Library of Congress, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=10462&recCount=25&recPointer=0&bibId=14404191>.

³² Felsenstein and Mintz, *The Jew as Other*, 42.

ample of the longevity and malleability of the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews.

5 The Bedevilment of Jews among the Nazis

The literature of the Nazis draws upon and expands these themes of Jewish bedevilment in literature intended for both adults and children. Our first example is a children's picture book, published by the infamous Stürmer Press and written by Elvira Bauer.³³ Its title "Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid" ["Trust no fox in a heathland and no Jew with his oath"] is adapted from an antisemitic pamphlet by Martin Luther.³⁴

Bauer titles her book's introductory poem

The Father of the Jews is the Devil

At the creation of the world
The Lord God conceived the races:
Red Indians, Negroes, and Chinese,
And Jew, too, the rotten crew.
And we were also on the scene:
We Germans midst this motley medley-
He gave them all a piece of earth
To work with the sweat of their brow.
But the Jew went on strike at once!
For the devil rode him from the first.
Cheating, not working, was his aim;
For lying, he got first prize
In less than no time from the Father of Lies.
Then he wrote it in the Talmud.

By the banks of Pharaoh's Nile
Pharaoh saw this folk, and said:
"I'll torment the lazy blighters,
These people shall make bricks for me."
The Jew did this all wailing and whining,
Never was there such cursing and swearing,

33 E. Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid* (Nürnberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1936).

34 *Trau keinem Wolf auf wilder Heiden // Auch keinem Juden auf seine Eiden // Glaub keinem Papst auf sein Gewissen // Wirst sonst von allen Drein beschissen*. M. Luther, *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen* (Wittenberg: Hans Lusst, 1543). ["Trust no wolf in wild heathland and no Jew with his oath, believe no Pope with his conscience, else you will be screwed by all in it."] Translation is by the authors of this article.

With bent backs and over-big slippers.
 Even today we see them shambling
 With lip hanging down and great red noses
 And looking daggers, flashing hate.
 They owe Pharaoh thanks,
 Who trounced them soundly for their pranks.
 The Jews soon had enough of that!
 The Devil brought them to Germany.
 Like thieves they stole into our land
 Hoping to get the upper hand.³⁵

Image 4. E. Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid* (Nürnberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1936), 4.

Bauer's distortion of the Exodus story is characterized by antisemitic stereotypes from Nazi propaganda, such as the supposed physiognomic characteristics of Jews. In her slander, Jews are lazy, but Pharaoh puts them to work. The so-

³⁵ Elvira Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs*, no page number. English translation by R. Bytwerk, see <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>. Last accessed May 9, 2019.

jour in Egypt is described as a kind of concentration camp. Israel did not do slave labor in Egypt: Pharaoh introduced it to teach the Jews how to work.

This slander is reminiscent not only of the Nazis' lie about the educational function of concentration camps but also of the bedevilment slanders of the Gospel of John and the sermons against the Jews by Chrysostom. Bauer's treatment of the Jewish Other draws upon prejudices and religious symbols from this cultural memory. For Bauer, it is the devil and not God who brought the Jews out of Egypt. From Egypt, they then traveled not to the land of Israel (unmentioned in her poem) but directly to Germany. Further resonance appears in Bauer's explicit allusion to John 8:44 with the title of her poem: "The Father of the Jews is the Devil."

Here again, Bauer employs the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews for the purpose of oppositional identity construction. While the Gospel of John and the sermons of Chrysostom identified Christians as the positive opponents of the Jews, Bauer positions the Germans in that role. The Jews remain the sons of the devil, but pious Germans replace pious Christians as their ongoing opponents.

Bauer's children's book is not an isolated example. It is symptomatic of the religious ideology of Nazi Germany. Two further examples may suffice to demonstrate how widespread the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews was during the Nazi period in German literature.

Polemicalizing against the supposed lies and slanders of the Jews, Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*:

In this, he (*scil.* the collective Jew) flinches away from nothing and becomes so vast that nobody should be surprised why with our people the personification of the devil as the emblem of all evil takes the living shape of the Jew.³⁶

A second example appears in a book series, Pamphlets of the SA, edited by Nazi journalist and writer Rudolf Elmayer von Vestenbrugg, under the pseudonym Elmar Vinibert von Rudolf. Elmayer von Vestenbrugg wrote the first volume of the book series himself and titled it after the infamous *Jews' Mirror* of Johannes Pfefferkorn, *Der Judenspiegel: Judentum und Antisemitismus in der Weltgeschichte*. In his book, Elmayer outlines the idea that the history of the world is

36 A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 514th–518th ed. (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Frz. Eher Nachf., 1940), 355: "Hier schreckt er vor gar nichts zurück und wird in seiner Gemeinheit so riesengroß, daß sich niemand zu wundern braucht, wenn in unserem Volke die Personifikation des Teufels als Sinnbild alles Bösen die leibhaftige Gestalt des Juden annimmt." The translation above is by the authors of this article.

patterned by recurring conspiracies of Judaism to gain world dominance and that each such conspiracy must be defeated by a pure Nordic Aryan people. In the introduction to this book, Elmayer von Vestenbrugg characterizes the basic conflict of history as follows:

As the son of the Satan-quality, Ahasver moves through world history. Forever under a different name but always remaining the same; in perpetuity reaffirming the truth and always lying. If lying implies the death of the Nordic people, it is the vital principle of Judaism.³⁷

6 The Bedevilment of the Jews in White Supremacist Christianity

Our last example consists of two internet memes from the white supremacist neo-Nazi webpage *smoloko.com*.³⁸ This webpage was founded and run (until at least 2018) by Scottie Spencer. Its self-description leaves little doubt that Smoloko adheres to antisemitic conspiracy theories:

Smoloko is a[n] independent run news-organization which strives to deliver educational and informative information and news to help give those who visit our site a better sense and understanding of the world and how it really works. Whether the topic is false-flag terrorism, the (((Illuminati))) central banking cartel or world-wide Judeo-Masonic misconduct, we will always cover it.³⁹

The first example from this site attempts to demonize (and sexualize) Jewish experience of the Western Wall, one of the most sacred sites of Judaism. Spencer, using the outdated expression “Wailing Wall,” labels this sacred site the seat of

37 R. von Elmayer von Vestenbrugg, *Der Judenspiegel: Judentum und Antisemitismus in der Weltgeschichte* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP Frz. Eher Nachf., 1938), 7 (published under the pseudonym Elmar Vinibert von Rudolf): “Als Sohn der Satan-Natur zieht Ahasver durch die Weltgeschichte. Ewig unter anderem Namen und doch immer sich gleich bleibend; ewig die Wahrheit betuernd und immer lügend. Wenn Lüge den Tod der nordischen Menschen bedeutet, so ist sie für das Judentum das Lebenselement.” The translation above is by the authors of this article.

38 <http://smoloko.com>. While the Smoloko website could be accessed during much of the research and writing of this paper, by late 2018 or early 2019 the site had been deactivated. Much of its content has been copied (or had already been cross-posted) on other websites. Where possible, parallel sources to Smoloko examples will be noted below.

39 http://smoloko.com/?page_id=2; see, for example, “9/11 Truth and Facts, Hidden History and Jewish Abuse of Power Revealed. Smoloko.com,” accessed May 9, 2019, <http://www.chuckmaultsby.net/id59.html>.

Satan, in terms reminiscent of John Chrysostom's slander of the synagogue as the dwelling of demons. The image portrays a section of the Western Wall, with typical notes and prayers pressed into the cracks between the stones. But the prayers are labeled "a note to SATAN," and a demonic face is imposed over one side of the image. The result is shocking and profane.

In the second meme, Spencer's activation of religious cultural memory is made explicit. Here he quotes the Gospel of John to describe Jews as the children of Satan. His treatment is resonant with early Christian themes, including the accusations that the Jews as a collectivity would have rejected Jesus and would have crucified him. "Jews are not the 'Chosen People,' of God anymore because they lost that privilege when they rejected the Son of God and crucified Him."

Image 5. Reference to John 8:44 to bedevil contemporary Judaism; image from a Protestant white supremacist website.

Source: Originally posted on <http://smoloko.com/?p=12567>; see also the comment by "Glory B.," posted September 23, 2019, on "Christians NOT Jews are God's Chosen People!" <http://www.realjewishnews.com/?p=134#comment-167963>, accessed May 9, 2019.

Spencer's antisemitic memes draw upon a diversity of memes from the religious and cultural memory of the Christian West, going back to ancient times. He uses these religious symbols to evoke the stereotype of a Jewish conspiracy of purportedly enormous power. Identifying the Jews as an external threat, he combines this trope with that of a larger conspiracy theory that Jews run "the new media, Hollywood, Wall Street," and "the government."⁴⁰

While tapping into cross-cultural tropes of antisemitism, Spencer's approach is also specific and local. His roots in Youngstown, Ohio, and the concern there

⁴⁰ See "The Man Behind the 'Anti-Semitic' Memes," issued April 2, 2017, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.henrymakow.com/2017/04/the-man-behind-the-memes.html>.

for the economic decline of the region (the so-called “Rust Belt”) are as important to his thinking as the symbols of cultural memory are to its representation. The impoverishment of his home region and the identity crisis that results from it might be specific to the experience of the predominantly white population of the Rust Belt, but the articulation of antisemitism that follows upon it relies upon religious and other symbolism from a larger cultural memory.

Scottie Spencer’s engagement with this antisemitic cultural memory does not end with his quotation of the Gospel of John. As another antisemitic web page observes, Spencer actually was in possession of Chrysostom’s *Sermons Against the Jews*, which was found in his car at the time of his arrest on charges of ethnic intimidation.⁴¹ The influence of the content of Chrysostom’s sermons on Spencer’s thought process is the *least* significant aspect of this picture—whether Spencer read the book, or simply came into possession of it—it served for him as an element in a larger cultural formation, the canon of Christian white supremacists in the United States.⁴² And this is a canon that assumes and asserts that Jews are demonic and have been since earliest history.

We must return here to notions of cultural memory and antisemitism as religion. Preconceptions about Jews—as demonic or bedeviled—are easily accessible in Christian cultural memory and in popular culture outside of Christian circles. An antisemite need not sit down and read Chrysostom—or even the Gospel of John—to have access to these tropes, because their transmission continues among antisemites (and indeed among Christian Bible-readers, even those who are not antisemitic).

The externalization of these tropes, in fact, lends them even greater strength: as examples of “objective” realities or inherited truths, they provide antisemites with “conceptions of a general order of existence” (as Geertz would have it), that are not only “uniquely realistic” but also provide a source for deep and “long lasting moods and motivations.” Inherited cultural memory takes on the potency of unique reality and truth, which participants need not *believe*—an excessive religious step—because those truths are simply there to *perceive* and acknowledge. The truth-value of even the most extreme antisemitic claims—within a closed

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² The act of owning such a text is as likely to locate a person culturally or socially as it is to reflect genuine ideological or intellectual engagement with its content. An interesting parallel can be found in the 1980s “Satanic Panic” in the United States, where accused criminals were sometimes labeled Satanists if investigators found copies of *The Satanic Bible* in their possession. Such texts must be understood as cultural objects that participants in a specific thought-world feel the need to claim, irrespective of whether they actually delve into their content in any nuanced way.

system of thought—is obvious and unchangeable to a believing, perceiving anti-semite.

The specific content of a particular antisemitic view can be variable—some antisemitism is indeed grounded in racist assumptions, while other views focus on religious claims and tensions, for example. But these distinctions belie other overlaps between racial and religious antisemitism, and the two certainly overlap in the claims of Scottie Spencer.

Nor is Spencer an isolated example in his use of the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews; he is, instead, the tip of a large iceberg. Consider just one other such example, from the *New History of the Jews*, by the American antisemitic writer and Holocaust-denier Eustace Mullins:

Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin are dead, but their heritage of Jewish terror is with us today. *All power to the Jews!* This was the Satanic pact which Roosevelt and Churchill signed, and because of it, each of these men died cursing the Jews, facing eternal damnation. All was ashes in their mouths, and they faced eternity with the terrible realization that for a few young girls and some bottles of whiskey, they had sold their peoples into slavery to the Jews.

To those who know the history of mankind, there is nothing new or shocking in this. [...] Throughout history, this sordid tale is repeated again and again, and throughout history, for the leaders and for the led, the message of Jesus Christ remains the same, “Turn away from Satan and follow Me.”⁴³

In past decades, Mullins’ writing might have passed away as idle or isolated ramblings. In the context of contemporary technology, however, every writer is also a publisher, and even the most isolated thinker can bring ideological claims to the eye of the world. Mullins’ book is available to all takers, free of charge, on the internet and is sold in hardcopy today by Omnia Veritas press.⁴⁴

7 Policies against Christian Antisemitism

The ideas of antisemites about Jews are deeply felt and long-lasting; they are equally irrational and passionate. They find expression in a shared canon of texts—some biblical, some post-biblical, and many more contemporary—that provide believers with externalized confirmation of their inherited and cultivated

⁴³ E. Mullins, *Mullins’ New History of the Jews* (Staunton: The International Institute of Jewish Studies, 1968), 7–8. The address of this purported Institute of Jewish Studies is that of Mullins’ home.

⁴⁴ See “Omnia Veritas,” accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.omnia-veritas.com/>.

understandings of the world and the place of the Jews within it. The legacy of ancient and late ancient antisemitism, and the contributions of medieval, modern, and contemporary antisemitism, can thus be described as a religious symbol system. But it is one that is united not by a positive confession of law, faith, or praxis but rather by a negative belief system: The Jews are the sons of the Devil, and their role in the world is to thwart all those whom they oppose.

In tracing examples of a religious symbol system that pictures the Jews as the children of the devil and as devil worshippers, finding links along the way from ancient Christian literature to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we hope to have shown that Christian antisemites draw on a system of negative religious symbols to perceive the Jewish Other. While outsiders will find their fervor irrational and their beliefs incredible, the unshattered conviction of antisemitism is grounded in a set of inherited lore that renders it consistent, logical, and utterly convincing from within.

This treatment of antisemitism in terms of religious truth-value is both troubling and potentially beneficial. Its trouble lies in the potency of religious commitment, which people feel in their deepest selves, in response to their experiences of family, education, and cultural memory. But people—and not only antisemitic people—do convert from one meaning-making system to another, and the very core of cultural memory that renders Christian belief potent for antisemites also retains deep possibility for rejections of their claims. Christianity itself, with its complex heritage of cultural memory, contains the tools to combat Christian antisemitism and bring it to an end.

7.1 Converting the Antisemitic Believer

Recent events in the United States and globally have demonstrated that concerns about antisemitism are far from theoretical. In fact, the very memes and stereotypes presented here have surfaced in the discourse of two young male white supremacists who perpetrated synagogue shootings exactly six months apart, in Pittsburgh, PA, on Oct. 27, 2018, and in San Diego, CA, on April 27, 2019.

The first shooter, Robert Bowers, used social media to post an announcement of his plans an hour before the attack. His announcement focused on Jewish support for immigration, but in his capsule biography on the website where he posted, he quoted and directly referenced John 8:44 as a reason for his actions.⁴⁵

45 The Southern Poverty Law Center's "Hatewatch" column analyzed Bowers' social media

John T. Earnest, the California shooter, chose to attack exactly six months after the Pittsburgh attack and identified both Bowers and the attacker in a mass shooting at two Christchurch, NZ, mosques as inspirations for his assault.⁴⁶ Earnest published a lengthy manifesto before the shooting, in which he referenced both the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation in demonizing Jews as the children of the devil and a “synagogue of Satan.”⁴⁷

In both of these recent shootings—as in the polemics published in *Der Stürmer* under the Nazis; as in the vile imagery at the gates of the Frankfurt Ghetto; as far back as Chrysostom’s tirades against his Jewish competition—the choice to dehumanize Jews as demonic or to construct Jewish communities as synagogues of Satan has been an implicitly violent one. At times, acts of violence have been pursued by people who *believed* in a Satanizing stance toward the Jews; at other times, we might argue that this rhetoric has simply provided a cultural frame in which hateful people can understand and act on their worst instincts. In either case, however, it is the presence of dehumanizing and demonizing memes as part of active cultural memory that has provided rationales and cultural cover for their destructive actions.

But the very source of these antisemitic memes is also the site in which Christian communities can locate theological, cultural, and social challenges to them. The very Christian churches in which John 8:44 have been read are also the places where pastors and congregations have access to profound alternative messages, of love for the Other, acceptance of difference, and even tolerance for contradiction. Some reconsiderations will be harder than others: acknowledgment of a painful history of challenge and conflict with a real Jewish Other will require that Christians not only recognize Judaism as a legitimate and meaningful parent religion but in fact take the much more difficult step of viewing Judaism as a sibling religion, as well, and one whose own claims and interpretations of a shared scriptural heritage require respect and engagement.

presence, for which see A. Amend, “Analyzing a Terrorist’s Social Media Manifesto: The Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter’s Posts on Gab,” SPLC Southern Poverty Law Center, issued October 28, 2018, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab>.

⁴⁶ See the analysis in the Columbia Journalism Review, published shortly after the April shooting; J. Allsop, “With Poway Synagogue Shooting, Online Hate Comes Alive again,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 29, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/chabad_poway_synagogue_shooting.php.

⁴⁷ The full manifesto was published by the newspaper *Haaretz*, April 28, 2019, at https://www.haaretz.co.il/embeds/pdf_upload/2019/20190428-073955.pdf.

The very universality of the Christian gospel brings with it the claim—and the ongoing challenge—to love or at least tolerate those who have not yet entered the fold. For every accusation of bedevilment in Christian Scripture there is a claim to universal love; for every text of *Adversos Ioudaios* literature, there is a doctrine of mutual respect.

In identifying antisemitism as a “religious” symbol system, and in locating a significant portion of its cultural memory and canonical content in texts drawn from the heritage of Christianity, we thus argue that the solution to the problem lies somewhere in relation to its source. As participants in a religion of love, and as heirs of a textual heritage that challenges that claim, contemporary Christians have an obligation to engage not only with their antisemitic coreligionists but more fundamentally with the texts that provide cover—and cultural authority—to antisemites across a diverse range of social settings and religious communities.

With this challenge and this obligation in mind, we refer readers to the Catalogue of Policies published in conjunction with this volume. As *Pirkei Avot*, the classical Jewish *Ethics of the Fathers*, remarks in the name of Rabbi Tarfon, “Yours is not to complete the task, but neither are you free to refrain from it.” (*Pirkei Avot* 2.16.)

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