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Challenging Antisemitism: A Pedagogical Approach in a Norwegian School

Introduction

This paper is based on an earlier study published in the *Journal of Jewish Education* and used with permission.¹ In addition, the paper also draws upon a nationwide study conducted by The Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities in Norway.² The topic of the study was attitudes toward Jews and manifestations of antisemitism in a high school in Oslo, Norway, with a majority of students self-identifying as Muslims. The main author was a full-time teacher at the high school (2013–2016) and took the initiative to conduct the study with the consent of the school leadership with a view toward challenging what was perceived as an entrenched antisemitic discourse. Semi-structured interviews, classroom discussions, and a trip to the synagogue in Oslo were employed in generating the data that informed the study.

Speaking in 2009, the then Foreign Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, said:

Norway has one of its darkest chapters in the way we treated our Jews during a dramatic period in our history. It has given us some instincts and lessons about when we should be on guard. I believe that we see particular signs in our time that indicate we should be on guard.³

It is such exhortations “to be on guard” that guide this study. Jahn Otto Johansen further observes that while neo-Nazis have been associated with antisemitism in Germany and western countries like Norway after 1989, several perpetrators of

1 Cf. P. Thomas, “Exploring Anti-Semitism in the Classroom: A Case Study Among Norwegian Adolescents from Minority Backgrounds,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 82, no. 3 (2016): 182–207.

2 Cf. Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, “Antisemitism in Norway? The Attitudes of the Norwegian Population towards Jews and Other Minorities” (Oslo: Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, 2021), <http://www.hlsenteret.no/publikasjoner/antisemitism-in-norway-web.pdf>.

3 J. O. Johansen, *Den Nygamle Antisemittisme* [The New-old Antisemitism] (Oslo: Jogo Media AS, 2015), 120. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Norwegian are by the authors of this essay.

antisemitic acts in recent years have been young immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa.⁴

Demographic Context

The population of Norway was 5.29 million in the last quarter of 2017, with immigrants, that is, first and second generation, comprising 17.3% of the total.⁵ The capital city, Oslo, was registered with a population of 673,468 with 33.1% coming from immigrant backgrounds. The highest categories obtained for immigrants from Pakistan (22,000), followed by Poland, Somalia, Sweden (13,000–14,000) and Iraq respectively, according to Statistics Norway.⁶ Due to the raging civil war, the highest demographic growth has been among refugees from Syria: “At the beginning of 2017, there were 20,800 immigrants from Syria, while the corresponding figure for the previous year was 9,700.”⁷ As this study was conducted in Oslo, and pertinent to the topic of antisemitism is the skewed distribution of certain ethnic groups to which we shall return to later. While the total percentage of immigrants is at 33.1% for Oslo, Figure 1 shows that immigrants tend to cluster around the northeast and southeast regions of the capital. Districts such as Alna, Grorud, and Stovner, which are often referred to collectively as Groruddalen, and Søndre Nordstrand, all in dark red on the map, have over 50% with immigrant backgrounds. While the two regions comprise 27% of Oslo’s population, 98% of the residents have immigrant backgrounds from countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, Poland, Iraq, and Eritrea to name the most prominent.⁸

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

⁵ Cf. “Key Figures for the Population,” Statistics Norway, last updated March 14, 2018, <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/nokkeltall/population>.

⁶ Cf. “Kommune fakta Oslo” [Facts on Municipality Oslo], Statistics Norway, issued 2017, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.ssb.no/kommunefakta/oslo>.

⁷ “Many New Syrian Immigrants,” Statistics Norway, issued 2017, accessed May 1, 2018, <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/many-new-syrian-immigrants>.

⁸ Cf. K. S. Wiggen et al., “Innvandrerers demografi og levekår i Groruddalen, Søndre Nordstrand, Gamle Oslo og Grünerløkka” [Immigrants’ Demographics and Living Conditions in Groruddalen, Søndre Nordstrand, Old Oslo and Grünerløkka], *Rapporter* 43 (2015), https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/_attachment/242895?_ts=150d7a03038,7.

Andel innvandrere og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre. 1. januar 2017 **Image 1:** Percentage of immigrants and their distribution in Oslo.

Source: Statistics Norway, “Færre medlemmer i kristne trussamfunn – dei islamske veks” [Fewer Members in Christian Denominations—Islam Is Growing], issued December 1, 2017, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/faerre-medlemmer-i-kristne-trussamfunn-dei-islamske-veks>.

Historical Context of Antisemitism in Norway

That antisemitism has a long pedigree in Norway is evident as far back as 1436, when Archbishop Aslak Bolt made it an offense to observe the sabbath in a Jew-

ish manner.⁹ A small number of Sephardic Jews were given refuge after escaping persecution in Portugal in the 1490s, but these exemptions were rescinded by King Christian IV in 1687 during the Union of Denmark-Norway. Martin Luther's antisemitism undoubtedly loomed large in the Scandinavian context.¹⁰ The Norwegian Constitution of 1814 forbade Jews from entering Norway. Frode Ulvund argues that two conflicting discourses dominated the political landscape before and after 1814.¹¹ Prior to 1814, accusations of Jews being subversive of nationalist aspirations held sway and culminated in the 1814 ban. The architects behind the constitution were convinced that Jews could never be good citizens and, because they apparently harbored ambitions to resurrect the State of Israel, would never assimilate, but seek to subvert nationalism.¹² Hence they posed a serious threat to national cohesion, not due to religious adherence but political convictions. After 1814, one detects arguments in favor of granting Jews entrance and citizenship underpinned by a Christian-liberal discourse. The writer, Henrik Wergeland, wrote to the Norwegian Parliament to lift the ban on Jews in 1839. He appealed on the basis of morals, love of fellow-humans, and justice. Among others, he pointed to the Quaker community in Norway who were exempted from certain official laws on religious grounds and countered that even Napoleon's Sanhedrin had demonstrated that obedience to statutory laws was a tenet of Jewish doctrine.¹³ Wergeland argued:

Can a Christian state exclude other humans whose family life is irreproachable and whose way of life is admirable? Can one forever ban a people whose history has turned up so many spiritual giants, so great lawgivers, significant scientists and intellectual leaders in ethics, music, literature and philosophy?¹⁴

⁹ Cf. O. Mendelsohn, *Jødenes historie i Norge gjennom 300 år. 1969* [The History of the Jews in Norway in the Last 300 Years] (Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 1969), 10.

¹⁰ Cf. T. Eriksen et al., *Jødehat: Antisemittismens historie fra antikken til i dag* [Hatred of Jews: The History of Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Present] (Oslo: NW Damm & Søn, 2009), 213.

¹¹ Cf. F. Ulvund, *Nasjonens Antiborgere: Forestillinger om Religiøse Minoriteter som Samfunnsfiender i Norge, ca. 1814–1964* [The Nation's Anti-Citizens: Perceptions of Religious Minorities as Enemies of Society in Norway, approx. 1814–1964] (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2017).

¹² Cf. H. Harket, *Paragrafen: Eidsvoll 1814* [The Eidsvoll 1814 Paragraph] (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2014).

¹³ Cf. H. Wergeland, *Indlæg i Jødesagen, til Understøttelse for Forslaget om Ophævelse af Norges Grundlovs § 2, sidste Passus* [Submission in the Jewish Case, in Support of the Proposal for Repeal of the Constitution of Norway § 2, last Passus] (Kristiania: Mallings, 1841), 36.

¹⁴ Johansen, *Den Nygamle Antisemittisme*, 107.

Wergeland died in 1845, six years before the controversial *Jødeparagrafen*—§ 2 in the constitution banning Jews and Jesuits from entering Norway—was repealed. Despite this, antisemitism lingered and would crystallize in legal proscriptions, such as the law banning the *shechita* Jewish ritual slaughter in 1930.¹⁵ Contemporary Jews draw parallels between the political party, *Senterpartiet*, and its call for a further tightening of the ritual slaughter laws and ban of Jewish circumcision with that of its predecessor in the 1930s, *Bondepartiet*, or the Farmer's Party. He concludes: "They believe that without meat which is slaughtered ritually and with a ban on circumcision, it will be impossible to sustain Jewish life in Norway."¹⁶

Once the Nazis occupied Norway on April 9, 1940, all Jews were required by law to hand in their radios, and "J" for Jew was stamped on their passports to expedite traceability.¹⁷ Ragnar Ulstein states, "On Yom Kippur, 10 September 1942, one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, the Nazis confiscated many Jewish-owned villas in the Oslo area. This occurred while many were in the Synagogue."¹⁸ According to the Norwegian government's report, the "Action Plan against Antisemitism (2016–2020)":

... the Norwegian police also participated in the arrests, along with members of the paramilitary unit of the Norwegian Nazi Party "Quisling's Hird" and Germanic SS Norway. The police action against the Jews on 26 November 1942 was the largest in the history of Norway. All Jewish assets and property were confiscated, on the initiative of the Norwegian Nazi party *Nasjonal Samling*. Members of the civil service, taxi drivers and civilians were also involved in the actions.¹⁹

On the other hand, several Norwegian citizens relayed coded messages to Jews warning them to go into hiding.²⁰ Seven hundred and seventy Jews, roughly one-third of the Jewish population were forcefully put onto the ship SS Donau and sent to concentration camps, with only thirty surviving.²¹ It was not before January 27, 2012, that the then Norwegian Prime Minister, and current General

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. Ulstein, *Jødar på flukt* [Jews on the Run] (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 2006), 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹ Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, "Action Plan against Antisemitism 2016–2020," issued 2016, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/dd258c081e6048e2ad0cac9617abf778/action-plan-against-antisemitism.pdf>, 17.

²⁰ Cf. Eriksen et al., *Jødehat*.

²¹ Cf. Hoffmann et al., *Antisemitism in Norway? The Attitudes of the Norwegian Population towards Jews and Other Minorities* (Oslo: Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, 2012).

Secretary of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, issued an official apology to the Jewish community for the arrests and deportations. Groping for explanations, Eriksen et al. ask:

Can one of the explanations be that Norwegian society already was so tainted by latent anti-Semitism that the Jews, after a presence of nearly a hundred years, were still considered an alien element? That they were as a group still excluded from the national “we”, and therefore were in the main abandoned to their own destiny?²²

Three aspects of George Fredrickson’s theory of antisemitism will be considered next. These include: antisemitism that is religiously inspired, one that acts as a “safety vale” against humiliation and defeat, and the medieval leitmotif of the Jew as the “Devil’s accomplice.” This will be followed by Emmanuel Levinas’ face-to-face ethical philosophy, which inspired the trip to the synagogue in Oslo and will be presented in the findings section.

Theoretical Framework

Racism, according to Fredrickson, is the assigning of “fixed or permanent differences among human descent groups and using this attribution of difference to justify their differential treatment.”²³ Vital to this study is the fact that the antisemitic variant of racism, unlike for instance its white supremacist variant, “presses toward the dissolution of the hierarchy through the expulsion or destruction of the lower-status group.”²⁴ Furthermore, and pertinent to this study, is Fredrickson’s understanding of religious bigotry as “directed at what people believe and not what they are.”²⁵ The students in this study come from Muslim backgrounds. However, this is not to say their antisemitism emanated from a well-defined Islamic theological underpinning given their disparate—that is, ethnic and denominational—backgrounds (some were Sunni and others Shia). A case in point is one student’s assertion from the findings: “It says in the Torah that Jews are permitted to tear out the vital organs of non-Jews and use their hearts, kidneys, etc., for themselves.” Despite this, and commensurate with Fredrickson, it is clear that their antisemitic utterances were rooted in a

²² Eriksen et al., *Jødehat*, 420.

²³ G. M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

worldview where Jews were perceived as the nemesis of their peculiar interpretation of Islam, one which may or may not find support among other Muslims. Seen through such a lens, Fredrickson's elaboration on religiously inspired antisemitism is apposite:

It is, however, useful to be reminded by Horowitz that for many groups outside the West, "religion is not a matter of faith but a given, an integral part of their identity, and for some an inextricable component of their sense of peoplehood."²⁶

The students often demonstrated this "sense of peoplehood" as global Muslims in their antisemitic utterances. In particular, the pejorative trope of the nefarious Jew was triggered because Palestinians were perceived as fellow-Muslims (some were unaware that Palestinian Christians existed)—much the same way that Muslims worldwide have championed the cause of Bosnian, Syrian, and the Myanmar Rohingya Muslims. Fredrickson argues that racism rooted in religious conviction is less susceptible to rational persuasion as its foundations are not subject to empirical falsification. However, he further contends that it is not the harboring of such antisemitic or racist views spawned through religious dogmatism that creates ethnoreligious conflict, but the "politicization of faith" when religious zealots endeavor "... to make others conform to beliefs they do not share [...] The Taliban ruled Afghanistan in ways that much of the rest of the world found unacceptable."²⁷

In addition, he draws attention to the socio-economic disparities thrown up by globalization that have led some to valorize race and religion as buffers against the erosion of self-worth and dignity. The above aligns with an earlier study in the same high school where Thomas et al. conclude:

The alienating effects of a postmodern world, or what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) calls "liquid modernity", where affiliations are dispersed, ephemeral and fragile, coupled with a general hardening of attitudes towards Islam in the aftermath of 9/11, are dislodged by students' recruitment of an explicit Muslim identity. The concept of *ummah* is germane in this regard. This is the transnational Muslim "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006) which transcends local parochialism.²⁸

Fredrickson builds on the work of Magnus Hirschfeld who fled Weimar, Germany and wrote his critique of Nazi ethnological theories in Nice. In attempting to un-

²⁶ Ibid., 140–41.

²⁷ Ibid., 149.

²⁸ P. Thomas et al., "Third Space Epistemologies: Ethnicity and Belonging in an 'Immigrant'-Dominated Upper Secondary School in Norway," *Improving Schools* 19, no. 3 (2016): 223.

derstand the rise of German antisemitism, he postulated that the Germans employed antisemitism as a “safety valve”—a logical extension of the will to power that had suffered a crushing defeat in the First World War. Unlike the powerful and inaccessible allies, the Jew served as a proxy figure—the enemy within the gates—who could be accessed and made to pay for the humiliating defeat.²⁹

Besides the antisemitism of the religious zealot and the scapegoating “safety valve” variant sketched above, Fredrickson considers how anti-Judaism morphed into antisemitism. This occurred when the “belief took hold that Jews were intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions.”³⁰ Of particular concern is the manner in which this medieval, Christian association of the Jew with the Devil has persisted and resonates with students from Muslim backgrounds, as the findings section reveals. It is precisely in its ability to change religious “garments” while retaining its toxic potency that antisemitism becomes the “scavenger ideology” par excellence.³¹ The toxicity lies in the fact that, not only is this fantasy impervious to rational persuasion, but its conviction that Jews are beyond redemption and that their obliteration is the will of their deity. Seen in this light, the Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi’s admonition is apt:

Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racist at-
tritions. It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchant-
ers, those who speak and write “beautiful words” unsupported by intelligent reasons.³²

Levinas’ critique of phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger was that their engagement with the “Other” was weak. The transcendent face of the “Other” abruptly announces its presence like an epiphany and morally accosts us, according to Levinas.³³ He argued that a genuine social dialogue—what he referred to as the face-to-face encounter—was premised upon the jettisoning of all pre-conceived binary codes and epistemological straightjackets. Language is the interlocutor that shatters the “strangeness” of the “Other” and compels us to confront and acknowledge the ethical inviolability of the “Other.” He further posits that the encounter does not seek to ignore the differences but acknowledges the gamut of emotional tension from trust to distrust, love and hate, and community

²⁹ Cf. M. Hirschfeld, *Racism* (London: Gollancz, 1938).

³⁰ Fredrickson, *Racism*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³² P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1986), 186–87.

³³ Cf. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 194.

and war. Ultimately, the infinity and alterity of the “Other” demands attention encapsulated in one word: obligation.³⁴ As such, this ethical obligation toward one’s neighbor is morally superior to relational typologies buttressed upon, for instance, Rousseau’s social contract or similar rational justifications because the “Other’s” inescapable beckoning becomes my master.

In relation to Levinas’ encounter, Karl Nipkow asks whether we can stand the “Other’s” strangeness.³⁵ Its salience lies in the fact that the “Other” meets us often against our will, not according to our preferences or convenience. To his mind, the encounter is akin to a biblical meeting—a “visitation” (*Heimsuchung*)—which subverts prejudice and has the potential to sow the seeds of a genuine “plurality” as “difference” that challenges us.³⁶ Hence the Levinasian dialogic relation is contingent and valorizes the inconvenience of proximity—the face-to-face encounter. Moreover, it is radical in that it goes beyond the Kantian categorical imperative in that responsibility to the “Other” is expected prior to consciousness or choice.³⁷ Nipkow’s summary below is commensurate with the purpose of this study, which is a pedagogy that takes seriously a life with responsibility in a plural world.

Moreover, the whole of moral education and true moral maturity is highlighted if maturity is understood, together with Levinas and other Jewish authors as well as Christian theologians, as a life with responsibility in a plural world.³⁸

Some methodological considerations follow after which the findings are presented.

Issues of Methodology

School Site, Access, and Ethics

The high school is situated in the east of Oslo and had approximately 622 students enrolled at the time of the research. Twenty-two public high schools and eight private ones receive state subsidies. While the average entrance score for

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 201.

³⁵ Cf. K. E. Nipkow, *God, Human Nature and Education for Peace: New Approaches to Moral and Religious Maturity* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003).

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 168.

³⁷ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

³⁸ Nipkow, *God, Human Nature and Education for Peace*, 169.

schools was 39.7, this particular school had an entrance score of only 31.3—one of the four lowest-performing schools in Oslo.³⁹ The study employed an ethnographic approach where semi-structured interviews, classroom-based discussions, and a trip to the synagogue in Oslo yielded the empirical data presented in this paper. Some of the participants shared their views during English classes, but the lion's share of the data was obtained during the biweekly classes in religion, philosophy, and ethics. The latter is commensurate with the observation, "Aside from history, the other principal curricular area which easily benefits from focus on antisemitism is religious and moral education."⁴⁰

Obviously, issues of reflexivity and ethics ought to be considered in a research undertaking where a teacher is an inescapable part of the research milieu.⁴¹ The idea to conduct this research arose on account of the ubiquitous and blunt antisemitic statements volunteered across the range of classrooms—years one to three; age range: sixteen to eighteen and above. Often this occurred without warning while the main author was teaching about a subject unrelated to Jews, as the findings section demonstrates. Once again, it must be made clear that while not all students in this school identified as Muslims, the opinions in the findings came from students who identified as Muslim. Given the gravity of the situation, and determined that such attitudes should not go unchallenged, the main author along with a couple of colleagues sought and secured permission from the head teacher to conduct the research as a first step in gauging the scale of the problem. Students were informed about the aims of the research and promised confidentiality. Significantly, the trappings of formality (interviews, notes, etc.) did not appear to temper the earlier antisemitism of the students. Obviously, the conundrum of the researcher's loyalty to the school and the public's right to know loomed large during the research.⁴²

39 Cf. Oslo Kommune Utdanningsetaten, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://www.oslo.kommune.no/etater-foretak-og-ombud/utdanningsetaten/>.

40 P. Cowan and H. Maitles, eds., *Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom: Key Issues and Debates* (London: Continuum, 2012), 191.

41 Cf. M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography Principles in Practice* (London: Routledge, 1983), 14.

42 Cf. K. Morrison, *Planning and Accomplishing School-centred Evaluation* (Dereham: Peter Francis, 1993); M. LeCompte and J. Preissle, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research* (London: Academic Press, 1993), 106; M. de Laine, *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2000), 13.

Classroom Discourse

Classroom discourse analysis explores “language in use” in the classroom and how this is shaped in the confluence of a plethora of contexts within and external to the classroom.⁴³ The “communicative repertoires” of the students are employed as analytical tools to approximate their attitudes toward Jews. This can be defined as “The collection of ways individuals use language and other means of communication (gestures, dress, postures accessories) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate.”⁴⁴ Three aspects are salient: the degree to which students’ prior attitudes gleaned from home may conform or diverge from mainstream society, what Bakhtin calls “living in a world of other’s words.”⁴⁵ Next comes the interactional context, which considers the influence peers have in the classroom context, and, finally, students’ agency and the ways in which their own multicultural/multiple repertoires shapes what transpires in the classroom.⁴⁶ As the findings indicate, despite the diversity of languages and repertoires represented in the study, one detects a “standard” antisemitic communicative repertoire which, it is argued, highlights the urgent need for authorities and stakeholders in education to combat.

Findings

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured questions were administered in two classes—one in the first year (total 12) and the other in the final year (total 23). In response to the question, “What in your opinion is the reason for antisemitism in Norway?” the majority, 12 of 35 students, blamed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A few examples follow:

In my view, the reason there is antisemitism in Norway today is Israel’s war against the Palestinians. It is no secret that the majority of those who hate Jews come from religious immigrant backgrounds. They see that this war affects families who practice the same religion as theirs (A1: final-year student).

⁴³ Cf. B. Rymes, *Classroom Discourse Analysis: A Tool for Critical Reflection* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 143.

⁴⁶ Cf. Rymes, *Classroom Discourse Analysis*.

Another reason why some individuals hate Jews could be what is happening in Palestine. Hating someone for killing innocent people to me is normal. But hating all Jews is wrong (A4: first-year student).

As long as Jews continue to kill Palestinians, all Jews will be objects of hate (A4: final-year student).

Israel and Jews in general are responsible for this hate. They oppress the Palestinians and the majority of Jews support this. They say that they have the right to defend themselves, but the Palestinians are defenseless—you cannot oppress those who have no military or economic strength. Jews have thought they are superior to others for thousands of years, which is the cause of antisemitism (A2: final-year student).

When people see Israel's aggression in the media, they believe that all Jews are murderers, which is the reason for antisemitism (A3: final-year student).

Some stated that their Muslim faith triggered a sense of religious altruism—a shared suffering with the afflictions of their fellow Muslims in Palestine. Overall, none saw any need to differentiate between the modern State of Israel and antisemitism as a racist phenomenon that predates the creation of the State of Israel. One student stated,

I believe that prejudices against Jews are “inherited.” It has become a trend to look negatively upon Jews. Most of all, people consider the terrible crimes committed against Jews in history and think they must have done something to deserve this (A6: final-year student).

“Jew” as an Offensive Term

The second question elicited responses to the question, “Have you heard the word ‘Jew’ used as a term of abuse? How should one react if ‘Jew’ is used to malign someone you know?” Twenty three of 35 students responded that they have heard someone use the term as a pejorative. The answers can broadly be grouped according to those who heard the term and unequivocally denounced its use, as opposed to those who heard the pejorative but appeared complacent or justified its use.

The lion's share of what is described as “complacent” responses (with some clearly indulging in classical antisemitism) came from first-year students. Some of these follow:

Not only my friends and family use this term pejoratively, but even I do. For instance, “stingy Jew” refers to someone who does not share his food with us. I do not think most of us mean it in a bad way, but it is a stereotype that Jews are stingy (B5: first-year student).

Yes, I have heard friends use the word “Jew” in a bad way. But there is no deep hatred harbored towards Jews. Nothing special, really! (B6: first-year student).

Yes, it is quite funny because “Jew” is used when someone is being greedy or has a big nose (B7: first-year student).

I have heard many, including myself, use the word in a very derogatory manner. Not just once, but almost on a daily basis. I don’t know any Jews so I don’t bother (B8: final-year student).

Obviously, it isn’t nice to call someone a “Jew,” but the Jews have themselves to thank for this negative connotation because of what they did to other religions in the past. I actually am indifferent (B9: final-year student).

Yes, I have heard this abuse several times. It is not good, but quite normal. (B10: final-year student).

A few other respondents affirmed the pejorative use of this word by making reference to friends who “hated” Jews, without divulging information about their own stance on the topic.

“Yes, I have a friend who really hates Jews” (B11: first-year student), and “Yes, my best friend uses “Jew” offensively. She is from Palestine” (B12: first-year student).

I have heard many use the word “Jew” as a term of abuse. It is used in much the same way as “homo” to hurt someone. One should put a stop to such behavior. (B1: final-year student).

Classroom Discussion

The English textbook contained a passage about the Puritans who left England for America and flirted with the idea of using Hebrew or Greek as the national language. Puzzled, several hands went up and asked “why Hebrew?” Having explained that the Puritans believed the Bible to be divinely inspired and the *Tanakh* was written in Hebrew, among others, the following conversation ensued:

Student (D1): I believe that Jews collaborate closely with the Devil.

Teacher: Can you please explain what you mean by this? Are you speaking metaphorically?

Student (D1): No, no ... they really have special powers through contact with Satan.

Teacher: Is there anyone else who believes this?

Student (D2): Teacher, have you read the Torah? Teacher: Yes, I have. What are you alluding to?

Student (D2): It says in the Torah that Jews are permitted to tear out the vital organs of non-Jews and use their hearts, kidneys, etc., for themselves.

Teacher: I am a teacher of religion, philosophy, and ethics and have not come across any-

thing remotely approaching what you say. Where in the Torah is this? Can you give me the chapter and verse please?

Student (D2): I don't have it here but I will show you.

Teacher: What is the cause of so much anti-Semitism in the world?

Student (D3): You have to understand that Jews' wish to dominate and colonize wherever they go. This is why they create tension wherever they go. They control all the multinationals of the world.

Trip to the Synagogue

Teachers of religion in the final year of high school in Norway often plan a trip to a church, a mosque, and either a Hindu or Buddhist temple. Some may elect to include a visit to the mainly atheist Norwegian Humanist Association. Although there is an entire chapter on Judaism, the religion is not a part of the mandatory curriculum. Having initially planned a trip to the local Lutheran church, the main author decided a visit to the synagogue would be salutary given the unvarnished antisemitic views encountered. Upon hearing about the decision to visit the synagogue, several of the students appeared visibly uncomfortable and took umbrage. Once again, the fierce opposition came from students who self-identified as Muslim; non-Muslim students raised no objections. Several questions were raised: "Do we have to go to a synagogue?" "Are we seriously expected to put on *kippas* (Jewish skullcaps)?" "What if I don't want to go?" The importance of cultivating tolerance in a multicultural world was explained. Furthermore, would they not take offense if a fellow student refused to remove his or her shoes when entering a mosque? Somehow, the latter counterargument ameliorated the earlier recalcitrance. Only 2 of 30 students failed to show up during the excursion to the synagogue.

The synagogue resembled a fortress with concrete blocks, armed police guards patrolling the vicinity and even a security guard inside the building. In September 2006, the Norwegian-born Islamist of Pakistani extract, Arfan Qadeer Bhatti, was arrested for spraying the façade of the synagogue with bullets. The armed police presence, an aberration in the otherwise peaceful urban ambience of Oslo, was a jarring reminder of how easily antisemitism transmogrifies into murderous violence. All the students (males) respectfully put on the *kippas* and behaved themselves in an exemplary manner. The female speaker lectured on diverse aspects of the Jewish faith and Jewish life in Norway. She made reference to the aforementioned Henrik Wergeland, who spearheaded the effort to jettison Paragraph 2 that bars entry to Jews. Furthermore, she paid tribute to the Muslim youth who formed a "Peace Ring" around the synagogue in February 2015, generating attention in international media outlets. The speaker made

the case for decoupling events that transpire in Israel with her right to be a Norwegian Jew. “I cannot be held responsible for the politics of the State of Israel,” she reiterated. Along the way, she expressed her admiration for a choir that toured Norway featuring Palestinian and Jewish children singing about peace and coexistence. Quite suddenly, she asked a few male students whose heads were buried between the pews to lift their heads and look at her. She shared that a student had recently engraved a swastika in the pew during her lecture. Prior to this, a student sitting close to the main author quietly drew attention to this swastika engraved close to where he sat. There was pin drop silence and stunned looks as students tried to come to terms with this.

Discussion

It was clear that the variant of antisemitism we were dealing with in the study was first and foremost secreted through a religious lens—a particular interpretation of Islam that held sway in several classrooms. Although coming from countries with disparate languages and cultures, such as Somalia, Chechnya, Morocco, Turkey, and Iraq, to name some, there was some unanimity to the effect that the default position of Islam was one that was simultaneously opposed to Jews. As Fredrickson pointed out, racism rooted in religious conviction is less susceptible to rational persuasion as its foundations are not subject to empirical falsification and becomes even more formidable when faith is politicized.⁴⁷ For instance, once while on break duty, the main author noticed a female student from a Somali background pass out leaflets on the school campus. The leaflet advertised for a seminar with a white British convert to Islam who had been condemned for explicitly antisemitic views in the UK.

Students would often share quite candidly, “Muslims will never rest until Israel is destroyed.” A male student, originally from Turkey, vociferously tried to silence a female student who expressed concerns about what she perceived as a growing “religiously motivated” antisemitism in the school. The boy interrogated her from across the classroom repeatedly shouting, “Would you marry a Jew?” At this point the main author had to intervene and threaten disciplinary action if the girl was not permitted to have her say. Once again, Fredrickson’s distinction between the antisemitism rooted in a white supremacist worldview and

47 Cf. Fredrickson, *Racism*.

the racist variant, which “presses toward the dissolution of the hierarchy through the expulsion or destruction of the lower-status group” is salient.⁴⁸

A deeper analysis of the conundrum brings up the following: the plight of Palestinians who are fellow Muslims, the collective defeat of several Arab/Muslim countries since the creation of the State of Israel—both often mentioned by students in discussions—and, vitally, Fredrickson’s aforementioned socio-economic disparities created by globalization appear to have induced these students to embrace a politicized variant of Islam as a buffer against the erosion of self-worth and dignity experienced in Norway and the West at large. A blend of crime, Islamophobia, and low aspirations has seen the district stigmatized over the years and many ethnic Norwegians leave.⁴⁹

In assigning all the blame to Israel for the prevalence of antisemitism, one is reminded of Fredrickson’s “safety valve” metaphor. Put differently, these students appear gratified that Jews everywhere are made to pay for the predicament of the Palestinians and what they often called the “Zionist” policies of the USA in classroom discussions. This “safety valve” phenomenon was played out violently in public when young demonstrators, many of Arab/Muslim origin, rioted in Oslo’s main parade street, Karl Johan, to draw attention to the war between Israel and Hamas in 2009. “One could hear many shout that they should go on to the University at Blindern (Oslo) to find and attack Jews.”⁵⁰ The youth clashed with police, attacked journalists, and smashed windows of restaurants and shops in unprecedented scenes. The above is commensurate with the view that “the new anti-Zionist/anti-Semite does not distinguish between Jews and the Jewish state and finds both objectionable.”⁵¹

What does a high school teacher do when one student raises his hand and states that the Torah commands Jews to tear out the hearts of non-Jews and use it for their ritual sacrifices? To further compound this, one-third of the classroom nodded in agreement. Here was a case of anti-Judaism morphing into antisemitism.⁵² Many teachers had quietly decided to sweep such incidents under the rug, but the main author was of the conviction that we as educators were doing a dis-

48 Cf. *ibid.*, 157.

49 Cf. I. Morken and S. Theie, “Skolebytte ved overgangen til ungdomsskolen: Hvilke faktorer legger foreldre i Groruddalen vekt på ved valg av skole?” [School Change at the Transition to Upper Secondary School: What Factors Do Parents in Groruddalen Emphasize when Choosing a School?] *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift* 99, no. 1 (2015): 15–27.

50 Johansen, *Den Nygamle Antisemittisme*, 119.

51 P. Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do about It* (Jerusalem: Green Publishing House, 2015), 145.

52 Cf. Fredrickson, *Racism*.

service to these adolescents in not challenging and, even better, transforming their attitudes toward Jews. Nevertheless, the realization that adolescent students genuinely hold the conviction that “Jews are intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions”⁵³ seriously tests the resolve of a teacher. Invoking the medieval Christian association of the Jew with the Devil—the “scavenger ideology”—and its blatant, cavalier affirmation in our presence was very unnerving. History has demonstrated what can transpire when individuals with power believe that they are agents of a divine being “anointed” to rid the world of Jews.

Admittedly, the thought of taking twenty-seven students with explicit antisemitic views to a synagogue was daunting. The event was unprecedented in several ways: for many, this was the first time they ever stepped in a synagogue; the first time they ever, in their own words, “permitted” a Jew to speak for so long to them; the first time males put on a *kippa*. The conditions clearly appear to have facilitated a Levinasian “face-to-face encounter.”⁵⁴ This was the “Other”—that is, the Jew announcing his presence like an epiphany and morally accosting these inimical students. The female speaker’s mention of members of her family who were murdered in the Norwegian Holocaust, and her appeal to be treated as a Norwegian Jew and not an extension of the policies of Israel, clearly left a deep impression on these adolescent students. Levinas reminds us about language’s potential to shatter the “strangeness” of the “Other” and compels us to confront and acknowledge their ethical inviolability.

Later, in the classroom, while broaching the subject of the architecture of synagogues, we meandered into the issue of ancient Israel’s first Temple—Solomon’s Temple—and reminded the students that it was a Lebanese King, Hiram of Tyre, who loved King David and Solomon and sent masons and material to build the Temple. One student retorted, “Arabs and Jews were good friends back then?” Obviously, the ancient Phoenicians were not Arabs, but aligned with a Levinasian pedagogy of ethical responsibility, we focused on King David and King Hiram’s ancient rapport as an example of a biblical meeting—a “visitation” (*Heimsuchung*)—which subverts prejudice and has the potential to sow the seeds of a genuine “plurality” as “difference” that challenges us.⁵⁵ Prior to the excursion to the synagogue, students were encouraged to pose critical questions to the speaker, but many responded later that her speech did ameliorate some of the anger they harbored. Although it would be an overstate-

53 Ibid., 19.

54 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

55 Cf. Nipkow, *God, Human Nature and Education for Peace*, 168.

ment to claim that one visit to the synagogue expunged the antisemitic views of these students, the more modest claim of enhancing the aim of moral education understood as a life with responsibility in a plural world is appropriate.⁵⁶

By way of conclusion, we will highlight some issues and policies that ought to be considered in combating the growing antisemitism in schools of a similar student composition. The cavalier manner in which antisemitism has become more upfront can be gauged by a recent incident reported in many Norwegian newspapers: the Norwegian-Iranian rapper, Kaveh, who has also performed at several high schools in Oslo, including the one in this study, said the following while performing at a concert on June 15, 2018. The authors have not spelled out the expletive, although every newspaper reporting this issues has.

“Are there any Muslims here? Eid Mubarak to you.” “Are there any Christians here?” without receiving an answer. “Are there any Jews here?” he asked, before he paused a bit. “F – Jews!” The statement did not get an immediate response from the public, but after a short while the artist said, “Oh, no, just kidding. We are all God’s children.”⁵⁷

After some complaints, the incident has been reported to the police, however, regrettably, past incidents have shown that very few are convicted for racism in Norway, according to NrK, the main broadcasting channel. “Few are convicted in line with the racism paragraph. Between 1977 and 2001, only seven persons were indicted for racism in line with the penal code’s paragraph 135a, racism paragraph, according to the Law Data (Lovdata).”⁵⁸

Conclusion and Way Forward

Bussing Students to Other School Districts

Both at this school, and as university lecturers, we have made it a point to highlight the current Islamophobic climate in Norway and other European countries. Students from Muslim backgrounds with antisemitic views are made to under-

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁷ F. Andresen, “F**ck jøder, sa Kaveh fra scenen. Nå vil han beklage” [F**ck Jews, Kaveh said from the stage. Now he will apologize] *Dagbladet*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/fuck-joder-sa-kaveh-fra-scenen-na-vil-han-beklage/69907758>.

⁵⁸ E. Larsen and M. Friestad, “Dømt for rasisme i Høyesterett” [Convicted of Racism in the Supreme Court], *Nrk*, April 12, 2012, <https://www.nrk.no/rogaland/domt-for-rasisme-i-hoyesterett-1.8070509>.

stand the plethora of ways in which hatred and persecution of Jews and, currently, Muslims, share some commonalities. For example, Jewish ritual slaughter was banned in 1930 in Norway with arguments at the time curiously resembling contemporary arguments to ban halal food.⁵⁹

To begin with, the authorities cannot allow a situation where so many students with virulently antisemitic views cluster in certain districts and schools in Oslo. Teachers cannot cope with this. Given the scale of the challenge, the current admissions policy must be changed. Denmark has practiced “forced busing” of students from deprived districts to more affluent ones for some years now with some success. Discussions about following the Danish model in Norway (e.g., the Copenhagen model where no school should have more than 40 % with a minority background) have revolved around language and a vaguely defined “integration” concern.⁶⁰ Clearly, concerns about antisemitism should also be factored into this debate as this unsavory phenomenon will not dissipate without effective intervention.

Educational Literature on Antisemitism

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training stated in 2016:

A study of the teaching materials disclosed that minority groups, such as Sami and Jews, are mentioned quite often, but only in a historical context. Contemporary challenges are given minimal attention.

The paucity of references to the Holocaust in all high school subjects in Norway is telling. The only subject which makes brief mention is history where one paragraph out of twenty pages about WWII refers to the Nazi incursion into East Europe and the Soviet Union. The paragraph mentions how the SS Einsatzgruppen followed in the wake of the regular Nazi soldiers into these countries to apprehend and kill Jews many of whom were sent to Auschwitz with 5.6 million Jews dying during the Holocaust. This is weaved in more as an appendage to the Nazis march on East Europe and the Soviet Union rather than a subject to be probed in its own right given that the Holocaust devastated Norwegian

⁵⁹ Cf. P. Thomas and A. Selimovic, “‘Sharia on a Plate?’ A Critical Discourse Analysis of Halal Food in Two Norwegian Newspapers,” *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 6, no. 3 (2015): 331–53.

⁶⁰ Cf. “Københavnmodel 2.0: Skeler ikke til etnicitet” [The Copenhagen Model 2.0: Ethnicity Does not Matter], Folkeskolen, issued 2011, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.folkeskolen.dk/68630/koebenhavnermodel-20-skeler-ikke-til-etnicitet>.

Jewry. One teacher, who has taught history for over thirty-five years in Norway, told me, “There is little problematization of the topic, and results from recent research are not included in the textbooks. Any proper study of the Holocaust in Norway is contingent therefore upon the teacher’s knowledge and will to work with the topic.”

Significantly, while the old curriculum for religious education from 1997 (L97) stated, “Students shall be taught about the history of Jews in Norway,” the current curriculum, which came into force in 2006 (LK06), changed this to “Students must be able to describe and reflect on the characteristics of art, architecture and music linked to Judaism.” Clearly, this lacuna in the curriculum stipulation must be addressed if the challenges uncovered in this study are to be ameliorated.

A Pedagogy to Combat Antisemitism

Above all, it will ultimately be the dedication and efforts of teachers that will make the difference if antisemitism is to be seriously confronted. It is imperative, however, that researchers and stakeholders in education first acknowledge the scale of the problem. It is the author’s opinion that this is currently not the case. The reason several teachers chose to look the other way in this particular school was due to what they perceived as the overwhelming magnitude of the problem. One Norwegian-Jewish minority advisor, for instance, broke down in tears in her office due to the abuse she had suffered during the short period she had worked in this school. She has since moved on.

As university lecturers training teacher-students currently, we have incorporated literature that aims to combat antisemitism in some of our courses. Teacher-students have expressed appreciation and shared that this subject has been shrouded in obfuscation for too long. In this regard, Critical Race Theory’s subversive storytelling is germane. The main author narrated the story about Ruth Maier, Norway’s Anne Frank which, surprisingly, a tiny few are familiar with. The Anschluss of 1938 devastated Ruth’s life in Austria, and she was forced to flee to Norway. Ruth spoke Norwegian fluently within a year, graduated from high school, and read Knut Hamsun’s classic novel *Hunger* (Sult) with ease. Ruth modeled for the sculptor Gustav Vigeland and is immortalized in the statue “Surprised,” which stands on permanent display in Frogner Park, Oslo. On November 26, 1942, Ruth Maier was arrested at her address in Oslo. Ruth was put on the SS Donau and sent straight to the gas chambers in Auschwitz five days later.

The aforementioned trip to the synagogue was another pedagogic tool employed to confront antisemitism. Obviously, it would be duplicitous to project

these recommendations as tools that banish antisemitism. Each case is different, with differing results. Teachers, however, are in the frontline of this challenge and have been entrusted with the all-important task of inculcating values amenable to nurturing citizens of an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world.

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