

ANTISEMITISM  
MYTH AND HATE  
FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

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## CONCLUSION

THE TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY OF JEW-HATRED shows with agonizing clarity that the most dangerous myths are those that demonize and dehumanize a whole people, characterizing them as the evil and dangerous Other. Following are two examples of Nazi demonological myths. The first, written in 1936, is from Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*; the second is from a speech delivered by Joseph Goebbels at the Nuremberg party rally in 1937. The mobilization of the German people's will to destroy the bacillus lodged in its body is a declaration of war on all Jews throughout the world. . . . Those who vanquish the world-Jew will save the earth from the Devil. Look, there is the world's enemy, the destroyer of civilizations, the parasite among the peoples, the son of Chaos, the incarnation of evil, the ferment of decomposition, the demon who brings about the degeneration of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

These fabricated myths, which transformed the Jew into something less than human and the source of evil, proved to be more than malicious rhetoric: They were instrumental in creating an attitude of mind that fostered and justified every conceivable cruelty, including the starving, gassing, burning, shooting, and bludgeoning to death of little children. And just as medieval Christian crusaders massacred Jews, the enemies and killers of Christ, believing that they were honoring their Lord, so those Germans, and their collaborators from several lands, who rounded up, tortured, and murdered Jews also believed that they were serving a higher cause—the good of their nation and European civilization.

The demonization of the Jews did not originate with the Nazis but with Christian theology. In this book we have treated the archetypal myth of the Jews as Christ killers and a criminal people and some of its many offshoots and transformations: the Antichrist, the Wandering Jew, the Talmud Jew, ritual murderers, host desecrators, poisoners, cosmic conspirators in the service of Satan plotting to destroy Christendom, and the Shylock monster of greed and economic exploitation. And we have dealt with two newly manufactured myths—the Holocaust is a Jewish invention and Jews dominated the slave trade—that drew their sustenance from centuries-old attempts to demonize the Jew. During the Middle Ages Christian myths about Jews shaped a mentality fraught with misconceptions and seething with hate that caused Jews to endure forcible ghettoization and impoverishment, forced conversion, persistent humiliation and persecution, and periodic massacres. It is true, of course, that Nazi racial theories were pseudoscientific, neopagan myths that emerged in a post-Christian age permeated by extreme nationalism. Although Nazism was fundamentally anti-Christian, Germans (and people in other countries) still affected by antique Christian myths that demonized the Jewish people were unlikely to recognize the dangers inherent in Nazi racial ideology at the time when Hitler was still struggling to gain power or in the early years of the

Third Reich. And it is undeniable that the Jew-hatred expressed in these denigrating Christian myths prepared the mind to accept, if not embrace, Nazi myths about the Jews and to participate in or be indifferent to genocide. The Nazis' characterization of the Jews as evil subhumans found receptive listeners among people whose inherited folk memory viewed Jews as evil children of Satan and whose clergy often still propagated this myth. Biological racism, rather than Christian anti-Judaism, determined the Nazis' extermination policy. (Modern racism, however, finds a precedent in the persecution of the Marranos of Spain and Portugal.)

Yet the perpetrators often took special glee in destroying synagogues, burning holy books and scrolls, and singling out Orthodox Jews for humiliation; at times the local population in Nazi-occupied lands of eastern Europe, where Christian antisemitism fused with nationalist passions, participated in these assaults. During World War II a Polish physician recorded in his diary the murder of Jews by his fellow Poles and noted how the dehumanization of the Jews had affected his countrymen. In the entry dated November 26, 1942, he wrote that a "psychosis took hold of them and they emulate the Germans in that they don't see a human being in Jews, only some pernicious animal, which has to be destroyed by all means, like dogs sick with rabies, or rats."<sup>2</sup> Doubtless greed for Jewish possessions, a desire to ingratiate themselves with the German invaders who encouraged the murder of Jews by the local population, a grossly exaggerated identification of Jews with the recently departed and still-hated Soviet occupiers of eastern Poland, and nationalist actions by some Poles<sup>\*3</sup> Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the medieval Christian myths of Christ killers, ritual murders, and sons of Satan, still very alive in Catholic Poland, induced these Polish peasants and villagers to slaughter their Jewish neighbors. A survivor who observed the Poles in his village of

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(\* The story of Jewish-Polish relations during World War II is a very complex historical issue. Both were victims of German oppression, for 3 million Polish Christians in addition to 3 million Polish Jews were murdered, a fifth of Poland's prewar population. In 1991 the bishops of Poland issued a pastoral letter, a historic milestone in Polish-Jewish relations, that invokes a "commonality" of suffering at the hands of the Germans that ought to bring Jews and Poles together. Yet Polish Christians also victimized Polish Jews. They turned Jews over to the Germans for rewards, extorted money from them in order not to inform on them, and murdered Jews, including Jewish partisans fighting the Nazis and escapees from the ghettos and death camps. There are numerous accounts of Poles expressing agreement with the German extermination policy, which they saw as a solution to their own Jewish problem and "a necessary evil" yet "the only way to solve the problem." After the war, surviving Polish Jews surfaced from hiding, made their way back home from the camps, and returned from Soviet Russia, where they had fled or been deported. Fearing that these Jews would try to regain their property, then in the hands of Polish Christians, or opposed to the restoration of a Jewish presence in Poland, Poles often made them unwelcome; they threatened and intimidated, murdered and set upon Jews in violent pogroms. It is estimated that in the first year after the war, several hundred Jews were murdered by fellow Poles, most notoriously the pogrom inspired by ritual murder accusations at Kielce, and 100,000 fled. But these sordid details are by no means the entire story. During the war, Polish Christians organized Żegota, the underground Council for Aid to Jews, and at the risk of their own lives

Poles rescued Jews from the Nazis. It is estimated that 2 percent of the Polish population helped Jews in one form or another, in the country where such efforts were more difficult and more dangerous than anywhere else in German-occupied Europe. In Yad Vashem, the museum in Israel that is a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, trees have been planted along the Avenue of the Just to honor thousands of righteous Polish gentiles. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, a book by Jan T. Gross published in Poland in 2000 and in English a year later, has elicited tremendous interest in Poland and is compelling Poles, as never before, to confront their complicity in World War II atrocities committed against Jews. On July 11, 1941, in the town of Jedwabne, the Polish Christian half of the population murdered the Polish Jewish half. In an orgy of brutality, the Poles (whom the Germans did not permit to have guns) clubbed, stabbed, and drowned their Jewish neighbors and then burned alive more than a thousand people, including children. After the war the Poles built a monument that blamed the crime on the Germans, but *Neighbors*, on the basis of survivors' and witnesses' accounts and trial records relates who actually did the killing and how. The stir caused by the book has led to the (re)discovery of several other incidents of the same murderous kind, although the extent to which Poles rather than Germans initiated the atrocities at Jedwabne remains controversial since Gross did not utilize the German archives. These revelations have induced some Polish clergy and intellectuals to reexamine and reflect on their country's antisemitic past and

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Radzilow forcing entire Jewish families out of their homes and beating them to death amid crowds of laughing Polish men, women, and children also speaks of the "propaganda . . . coming out from the upper echelons of Polish society which influenced the mob, stating that it was time to settle scores with those who had crucified Jesus Christ, with those who take Christian blood for matzoh and are a source of all evil in the world—the Jews. . . . It is time to cleanse Poland of these pests and bloodsuckers."<sup>4</sup>

The Holocaust, which left a permanent wound in the Jewish soul, also disturbed the Christian conscience. Increasingly Christian scholars and clergy have honestly confronted their churches' historical record with respect to the treatment of Jews and the connecting links between traditional Christian fulminations against Jews and Nazi antisemitism, and have labored to remove an anti-Jewish bias from Christian teachings. Jews and Christians engage in fruitful dialogues concerning the connecting strands between their faiths, including the Jewishness of Jesus and the ethical teachings and ceremonial practices that Christianity derived from Judaism. And in impressive displays of goodwill, Christian and Jewish clergy work together to combat intolerance. In particular, Christian schools have purged textbooks of passages distorting or denigrating Jews, and many other good works of a like kind. Elites in Western lands have also learned from the Holocaust. Unlike before World War II, antisemitism is no longer respectable. Aware of the links between antisemitic demagoguery and extremist movements that threaten democratic society, influential people neither promulgate nor endorse antisemitism, and governments will not tolerate antisemitic violence. Admittedly, the antisemitic venom recently displayed by some of the European elite is an ominous sign, and there are, of course, far Right movements in every Western country that promote Jew-hatred.

In several eastern European countries, where historically antisemitism was vile and vicious, some political, intellectual, and religious leaders are making sincere efforts to come to terms with their nation's past and to resist a re-

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to draw appropriate lessons that will strengthen young Polish democracy; others have reacted defensively, denouncing Gross for defaming his native Poland and lending himself to a New York-centered Jewish plot of "anti-Polonism." After an inquiry of nearly two years by Polish historians, however, Gross was vindicated: "[T]he role of Poles in this criminal act was decisive," according to their spokesman, Radoslaw Ignatiew; the German presence was important as a catalyst but the Polish role was "decisive"; at least 40 Poles participated in this "planned crime," but Gross' estimate of 1,600 dead is somewhat high. (Steven Erlanger, "An Inquiry Confirms a Massacre of Jews by Poles in World War II,(" New York Times, July 10, 2002, A4. )

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birth of fascism, with which European antisemitism is strongly identified. In past generations, such figures had rarely attempted to rebut lethal antisemitic myths and often were in the forefront of those disseminating them or exploiting them as political weapons. The catastrophe inflicted on the Jews during the Nazi period has reversed this trend to a lesser or greater degree. Eastern European political and cultural elites are also aware that in the new Europe that is emerging with the decline of communism, the growth of neofascist parties with antisemitic agendas will arouse the ire of Western states whose friendship and support they need and are trying to cultivate.

Nevertheless, crude antisemitic myths and lies are still disseminated and believed, and desecration of Jewish cemeteries and vandalism of Jewish property still occur. A perennial problem stems from the ease with which the ordinary Christian believer can read or hear recited in church both the dramatic story of the crucifixion with its anti-Jewish bias and the anti-Jewish polemics that abound in the gospels. Taking these sacred texts literally, unaware of two centuries of scholarly qualification, reconstruction, emendation, and explanation, he or she comes away with a denigrating image of "the Jews." A recent example is that of two New York professional basketball players who participate with their teammates in a Bible-reading study group; for these young "theologians" nothing has changed: "[The Jews] spit in Jesus' face and hit him with their fists" and they "had his blood on their hands"; moreover, "[t]here are Christians getting persecuted by Jews every day." When queried, their explanation was that they only said "what happened biblically," the same response as a much more sophisticated public figure, who explained that in stating in his Easter message on the Web that Christ "was crucified by the Jews," he was "merely quoting Scripture."<sup>3</sup> Obviously the new theology and biblical interpretations formulated by Christian thinkers, which repudiate the decide accusation as well as the intentions to convert Jews that had over the centuries inflicted so much suffering on the Jewish people, have not reached

all the Bible readers or churchgoers in the pews.

There is also the problem of the Arab world aping Western antisemitic myths. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Islamist demagogic rhetoric has reproduced every element of historic Christian European antisemitism: “The Jews constitute a secret conspiracy to conquer and dominate the world. Judaism is evil and requires Jews to harm non-Jews. The Talmud, among other nefarious commandments, requires them to commit ritual murder. By nature Jews are criminal and immoral. They are greedy for wealth and procure it by any means. They control the media and the economy—the banks, commerce, and they ruin their competitors, and are responsible for capitalism and/or communism. Jews are bent on subverting religion; they murdered Jesus and tried to poison Muhammad. They are inveterate traitors and cunning conspirators who destroyed the World Trade Center to stir up anti-Muslim sentiments. Not surprisingly, as the liberal Muslim theologian Khalid Durán deplorably remarked, “the ‘Common Man’ in the Muslim world is mostly fearful and suspicious of Jews.”<sup>6</sup> These suspicions, fears, and hatreds are exacerbated by Islamist clerics, who see Muslims engaged in a “struggle for existence between Koran and Talmud” and teach “Jihadism” and martyrdom. Of late Arab/Muslim pronouncements on the Jews are increasingly genocidal, as when the Syrian defense minister said he kills any Jew he sees and that when all Arabs do the same, the “problem” will be “solved.” In April 2002, a columnist for the Egyptian government daily, *Al-Akhbar*, wrote these chilling words: “Thus the Jews are accursed, the Jews of our time, those who preceded them and those who will come after them, if any Jews come after them. With regard to the fraud of the Holocaust . . . I, personally, complain to Hitler, from the bottom of my heart, ‘If only you had done it, brother, if only it had really happened, so that the world could sigh in relief [without] the Jews’ evil and sin.’”<sup>7</sup> In a bizarre twist, Islamist rhetoric has fused the United States, Europe, Christianity, and the Jews into one monstrous entity and calls for, in Osama bin Laden’s words, a “Global Islamic Front to Fight Jews and Crusaders.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the lethal history of the myth of deicide and the other myths we have examined, antisemitic delusions must not be dismissed as harmless residues of the past. Christians are particularly behooved to repudiate them and shun those deluded and wicked souls who propagate them and scholars are obliged to analyze them and to point out their logical absurdity and historical danger not only to Jews but to civilized values. It is with this conviction that we have written this book. Otherwise we shall never be free of the kind of irrational fixation reported by Victor Klemperer in his diary for June 11, 1940: “Today I heard: A [German] woman comes to see her wounded husband in the military hospital here [in Dresden]; on entering the room she sees a completely mutilated person, an ear, one half of the face, an arm have been torn off. She starts screaming and doesn’t stop: ‘It’s the Jews’ fault! It’s the Jews’ fault!’ [To which Klemperer responded prophetically:] They really will put us [Jews] up against the wall yet.”<sup>9</sup>











