

CHRISTIANITY AND ANTI-SEMITISM

by ZVI BACHARACH

Shmuel Ettinger, *Modern Anti-Semitism; Studies and Essays*. Tel-Aviv, Sifriat Poalim — HaKibbutz HaArzi HaShomer HaZair, 1978, 285 p.

שמואל אטינגר, האנטישמיות בעת החדשה; פרקי מחקר ועיון, תל-אביב, ספריית פועלים — הוצאת הקיבוץ הארצי השומר הצעיר, תשל"ט, 285 עמ'.

Professor Ettinger's book is one containing studies and essays which present a clear profile of his conception of anti-semitism.¹ It can be perceived as an attempt to approach anti-semitism as a universal phenomenon. Such an intention has been emphasized in the editor's preface, and characterized Ettinger's approach as an analysis of the uniqueness of the Jews, reflected in the historical conscience of the Gentiles, from Hellenistic to modern times. In accordance with this universal pattern, the essays have been arranged as follows:

- 1) The emergence of the Jewish stereotype during the course of world history — an introductory essay.
- 2) Judaism and Jews in the eyes of the English deists of the eighteenth century; the young Hegelians versus the Jewish religion — covering some of the anti-Jewish motifs in Western European thought.
- 3) Leaving the Western European scene, the author focuses on the anti-Jewish attitudes developed in the course of Eastern European history.
- 4) The last section of his book concentrates on the role of pre-war anti-semitism in paving the way to the Holocaust. This structural arrangement hints at the continuity in the history of modern anti-semitism. It is only natural that Ettinger, being an expert on Eastern European Jewish history, would give preference to a discussion of Eastern European anti-semitism: the ideological background of anti-semitic literature in Russia; the image of the Jews in Russian public opinion up to

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the 1880's; Russia and the Jews — an attempt at an historical summary; Jews and non-Jews in Eastern Europe 1918–1945; the Holocaust and the problem of Jewish identity in Soviet Russia.

These topics provide the subject matter for the major part of Ettinger's book.

It is not the specific historical aspect of each of these essays which concerns us here, but rather Ettinger's general view of anti-semitism — his historiographical judgement on the *universality* of anti-semitism which attracts our attention. His credo is emphasized throughout the various sections of the book. He has clarified his view in the introduction: The Jews as a monotheistic minority were dispersed all over the Hellenistic empire, being a constant stimulant and competitive rival amongst the different nations and cultures; religious antagonism and disputation, as well as the uniqueness of the social and moral way of Jewish life shaped the hostile attitude toward the Jews. Thus developed the negative image of the Jew throughout the ages. Each specific historical period put its stamp on this *pre-existent* negative stereotype (pp. xviii, xix):

“...As has been stated, it was not Christianity which moulded the negative attitude towards the Jews, though from the theological point of view, its polemic against Judaism was much more vital to it than to any other religion or cultures...” (p. xviii)

Therefore, modern anti-semitism should be understood as the metamorphosis of ancient Jew-hatred (pp. 213, 216, 218, 221, 223, 255).

What then, is Ettinger's determination of the Christian roots of anti-semitism? How does the responsibility of Christian theology fit into the universal framework of anti-semitism? It is Ettinger's opinion that Christianity as a monotheistic faith only *altered* the antagonistic pattern but did not principally fix the negative attitude held towards the Jews (p. xviii):

“...It is important to stress that as in the days of the Church fathers, when the dominant characteristics were added to the negative image of the Jews, such as their being unscrupulous God-killers who were repudiated by the Voice of Providence (in addition to their already negative image from pre-Christian times), so in the Middle Ages there appeared blood accusations, denunciations of usurers... thereby increasing the negative image — and thus the stereotype began to crystallize...” (p. xix)

Christianity built up its own positive image and power by reaping the benefits of the hostile attitude towards Judaism. The Jew became an integral component in the rise of Christianity to power. Christian ideology needed, and therefore created, the “inferior” Jews, in order to maintain the belief in Christian “superiority”. The Jew served as historical *testimonias*, by means of his denigrated condition, of Christianity's victory (pp. 3|4):

“Jew-hatred characterized the believing Christian, as proof of his religious devotion, although, the Jews’ redemption from sin and wickedness, as well as their conversion (in order to become members of the Christian Church) remained the declared goal...” (p. 4)

Again and again, Ettinger stresses the fact that this Christian policy was only possible because of the existence of a negative Jewish stereotype in pre-Christian times. It is this thesis which raises some critical reservations.

There is no doubt that Jewish history is characterized by its religious “otherness” as well as by its unique religious mission. This exclusiveness marked Jewish-Gentile relations in the polytheistic ancient world. But was this “otherness” the basis for a *universal* Jew-hatred? Let us turn to the words of a modern scholar:²

“...To realize this more clearly, let us turn to a period closer to us and more familiar, when under Caesar and Augustus, Rome established her domination over the Mediterranean world... as the only people to profess the belief in one God, they were singularly distinguished from all the other subjects of the empire. May we, then, infer the existence of a generalized “anti-semitism,” that is, of an effective *sui generis* attitude of the Gentiles regarding the Jews, an endemic hatred pregnant with explosive outbursts, reducing the children of Israel to pariah status and exposing them, as traditional scapegoats, to numberless and endless massacres?... The “Jewish question” does not seem to have had more than secondary importance for the men of those times... Thus from this rapid scrutiny we may draw certain conclusions. On the one hand, we observe in pagan antiquity none of those collective emotional reactions that would subsequently render the lot of the Jews so hard, and so precarious. We may add that, in general, the Roman empire in pagan times knew no ‘state anti-semitism’...”

Indeed, anti-Jewish prejudices existed in antiquity. But such outbursts should be understood within the context of *specific* Hellenistic-Roman history which did not evaluate the Jew as a *universal* evil.³

I believe that Collinwood was right in stating that Christian principles are of necessity universal, providential and apocalyptic.⁴ It was Christian faith which invented the deicide libel, which provided world-universal history with the image of the diabolic-omnipotent-evil Jew. The argument, dear to Christian theologians, that universal anti-semitism existed in all ages, long before the Christian era, redeems Christianity from its moral and historical responsibility, as far as the Jews’ fate in world history is concerned. Let us consider what Christian scholars have to say about such responsibility:

2. Léon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-semitism: From the Time of Christ to the Court Jews*, English trans. Richard Howard. New York, Schocken (1974), 1976, pp. 4, 11.

3. R.G. Collinwood, *The Idea of History*, (London: 1946), Oxford: 1963, pp. 49–50: “...Greco-Roman ecumenical history is not universal in this sense, because it has a particularistic centre of gravity. Greece or Rome is the centre round which it revolves..”

4. R.G. Collinwood, *Ibid.*

"...The climactic crime of this evil history is the killing of the messiah. It was to give this 'crime' a legacy and tradition that Christian apologetics read Jewish history in this manner. As Christology is heightened to the full doctrine of Christian faith, this comes to be seen not only as the killing of a prophet. It becomes the killing of God, the crime of 'deicide'; a crime of treason and *lèse majesté* against the Sovereign of the Universe Himself. For criminals of such a stamp, no vituperation can be too extreme. In the sermons of John Chrysostom, the Jews are continuously spoken of as devils, their synagogues as brothels of the devil, and their very souls are declared to be dwelling places of demons..."⁵

James Parkes' indictment is even more drastic, revealing the causal connection between the Christian accusation of deicide, and the Nazi crimes of genocide.⁶ Hitler himself relied on Church precedent when attempting to justify his anti-Jewish outlook. He did not refer back to universal roots embedded in antiquity, but rather claimed that it was the Roman Catholic Church which libeled the Jews for fifteen hundred years as "evil ones" (*Schaedlinge*); he was referring to what had been done against the Jews for the past fifteen hundred years. Hitler considered his actions as probably the greatest service which he could have provided Christianity.⁷

Professor Ettinger has compared the factors and results of Nazi and Soviet anti-semitism (p. 229). He explains that in Germany, Nazi criminals were tried, whereas in Soviet Russia crimes against the Jewish people were covered up. Criminals from the Stalinist period were not brought to trial. Even in recent times, anti-Jewish activities are concealed by the authorities. Ettinger concludes that while we can speak of "another Germany" today, there still exists the same active and official anti-semitism in Soviet Russia. But in the same sense, could we not point to the ever-present and continuous Christian ideology of Jew-hatred?

Have the leaders of the Christian churches revised their anti-Jewish theology? It is tragic that one can compare Nazi crimes with Christian anti-Jewish theology, but as far as universal anti-semitism is concerned, was it not Christianity which initiated the Jews' image as *absolute* evil, as the devil-incarnate? Unlike Ettinger, Professor David Flusser has stressed the Christian impact on anti-semitism. No Christian will admit that since the days of Paul the Apostle, the strained

5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The History of Christian Theology and the Demonization of the Jews," in: *Auschwitz — Beginning of a New Era?; Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischer. (New York: 1977), p. 84.

6. James Parkes, *Anti-semitism* (London: 1963), p. 60: "...That which changed the normal pattern of Jewish-Gentile relations was the action of the Christian Church. The statement is tragic but the evidence is inescapable. What is still more tragic is that there is no break in the line which leads from the beginning of the denigration of Judaism in the formative period of Christian history, from the exclusion of Jews from civic equality in the period of the Church's first triumph in the fourth century, through the horrors of the Middle Ages, to the death camps of Hitler in our own day..."

7. Hans Mueller, ed., *Katholische Kirche und Nationalsozialismus*, München, DTV, 1965, p. 129.

relationship with Judaism is an integral part of Christianity *per se*. This Christian attitude, says Flusser, should be held responsible for the atrocities and crimes throughout the ages.⁸

The historical fact of Christian guilt in presenting the Jews as a *universal evil*, I believe, has been belittled in Ettinger's important book on modern anti-semitism.

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8. David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity; Studies and Essays* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, Sifriat Poalim, 1979, p. 24.