We Remember:  
“Antisemitism had Its Roots Outside of Christianity” – Really?  
A Reflection on Early Modern Europe  

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The 1998 publication We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah, reads, among other things: “Thus we cannot ignore the difference which exists between antisemitism based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church on the unity of the human race and on the equal dignity of all races and peoples.” And further on, “The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its antisemitism had its roots outside of Christianity.” The publication emphasizes “the constant teaching of the Church on the unity of the human race and on the equal dignity of all races and peoples.”

Thus, the 1998 publication condemns modern antisemitism and distinguishes the Church’s theological anti-Judaism from modern antisemitism. Indeed, the term Antisemitismus did not exist before 1879. It was coined only then, or a few years earlier, if not definitely so then most likely so, by Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904) to “impart a new, nonreligious connotation to the term anti-Jewish.”

Many historians, however, argue for the continuity of the oldest hatred from antiquity to modern times, using “antisemitism” and its derivatives independently of any particular era or historical periodization. Shulamit Volkov elucidated the...
principle of continuity or discontinuity of antisemitism: “Clearly, from a historical point of view, every event is rooted in the past, but at the same time, every phenomenon is at least in some way new and unique. The ongoing debate on break and continuity is thus only about the correct proportions.”4 Scholars also emphasize the variety of elements that construct modern antisemitism, religion/theology being one of them. Thus, Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß have observed: “Not all forms of pre-modern anti-Judaism were religiously motivated, and in the modern racist antisemitism that emerged around and after the Emancipation, religion continued to play a major role […] this mixture of religious, political and ethnic aspects can also be seen in medieval anti-Jewish phenomena.”5 Accordingly, there is no reason why “Christian antisemitism” should not be used to emphasize the religious/theological elements of the term—in relation to early modern Europe—without excluding other aspects manifested or implied by it. A few demonstrations are needed here.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was a Christian humanist (sometimes called Biblical humanist) and theologian, perhaps the most progressive of his time (known as “the prince of Humanists”). A devout Catholic who disputed Martin Luther on essential doctrines, Erasmus dedicated his Novum Instrumentum, his new critical version of the New Testament (1516), to Pope Leo X. Far from Luther’s incendiary anti-Jewish incitement, Erasmus was identified with “a-Semitism, an indifferent alienation from all things Jewish.”6 However, a reading of Erasmus’s remarks on the Jews suggests that he was more inclined to antisemitism than to “a Semitism. Indeed, historian Heiko Oberman has described Erasmus as a forerunner of racial antisemitism, closely linked to “the roots of antisemitism.”10 Regarding Erasmus’s venomous slander of Johannes Pfefferkorn (1469-1521), the notorious convert, Oberman writes: “Here we encounter not just anti-Judaism, as Erasmus scholars

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insist, but we touch on one of the roots of antisemitism … The fatal shift from anti-
Jewish sentiment to racial antisemitism can already clearly be discerned when, in
the later Middle Ages, the cleansing waters of baptism are no longer believed to
purify the sinful Jew.” Following on from Oberman’s observations, a few more
demonstrations are presented and analyzed here. A passage in Erasmus’ colloquy,
“The Godly Feast” (Convivium religiosum, 1522), in which Theophilus, one of the
speakers, presents a detailed, theological conviction, purely Erasmian in its es-
sence, reads as follows:

But God rejects the Jews, not because they would keep the rites of the law but
because, foolishly puffed up by keeping them, they would neglect what God
especially requires of us. Saturated with greed, pride, theft, hatred, envy, and
other sins, they thought God much in their debt because they frequented the
temple on holy days, offered burnt sacrifices, abstained from forbidden foods,
and fasted occasionally. They embraced the shadows and neglected the sub-
stance. As for “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” I suppose this is Hebrew
idiom for “I desire mercy more than sacrifice”; as Solomon means when he
says, “To do justice and Judgment is more acceptable to the Lord than sacri-
fluence.”

In a March 1518 letter to the theologian Wolfgang Faber Capito (1478-1541), Eras-
mus harshly condemned Jews in general and Marranos in particular, while
expressing, among other things, his distaste for the Kabbalah:

I see them as a nation full of the most tedious fabrications, who spread a kind
of fog over everything, Talmud, Kabbalah, Tetragrammaton, Gates of Light, words, words, words. I would rather have Christ mixed up with Scotus than
with that rubbish of theirs. Italy is full of Jews, in Spain there are hardly any
Christians. I fear this may give that pestilence that was long ago suppressed a
chance to rear its ugly head.

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8 Proverbs 21: 3. The passage is in ASD I-3, 246-247: “Iudaeos autem adversatur Deus, non quod ob-
seruarent legis ritus, sed quod his stulti tumidi negligerent ea, quae Deus maxime vult praestari a nobis
ac madentes avaritia, superbia, rapinis, odio, liuore caeterisque vicis existimabant Deum ipsis multum
debere, quod diebus festis versarentur in templo, quod immolarent victimas, quod abstinerent a cibis
vetitis, quod illi nonnunquam ieunarent. Vmbras amplectebantur, rem negligebant. Quod autem ait,
Misericordiam volo et non sacrificium, opinor ex idiomate sermonis Hebraei dictum pro eo quod erat
Misericordiam volo potius quam sacrificium, quemadmodum velut interpretatur Solomon, quam ait
Facere misericordiam et judicium magis placet Domino, quam victimae.” ASD = Opera Omnia Desid-
erii Erasmi Roterodami (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969–).  
9 The Kabbalistic work Sha’arei Orah was composed by Joseph Ibn Gikatilla (13th century, Spain). The
Latin edition was titled Portae lucis (Augsburg: Johannes Miller, 1516). The Hebrew original of this
work was published in Mantua, 1561.
fumos quosdam obicere; Talmud, Cabalama, Tetragrammaton, Portas Lucis, inania nomina. Scoto
malim infectum Christum quam istic nenii. Italia multos habit Judaeos, Hispania vix habitat Christianos.
Vereor ne hac occasione pestis iam olim oppressa caput erigit.” CWE = Collected Works of Erasmus
Moreover, the ideal Europe, according to Erasmus, was one free of Jews. In his *A Complaint of Peace* (*Querela pacis*, 1517), Erasmus admired the Christian purity of France due to the absence of corrupt Jewish commerce and the fact that—according to Erasmus—the Turks or *marranos* were nowhere to be found, so the country was free from their infection. France was thus the flower of Christendom: “The law flourishes as nowhere else, nowhere has religion so retained its purity without being corrupted by commerce carried on by the Jews, as in Italy, or infected by the proximity of the Turks or Marranos, as in Hungary and Spain.”\(^{11}\) The same idea appears in Erasmus’s March 1517 letter: “Only France is not infected with heretics or Bohemian schismatics nor Jews or half Jews Marranos, and there are no Turks to be found in its vicinity.”\(^{12}\)

These assertions indicate an acknowledgment of the expulsion of the Jews from France throughout the Middle Ages, with the most significant deportations taking place in 1306, and at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. France, whose Jews had been expelled, served Erasmus as the model of a purely Christian state. Indeed, he did not explicitly call for the expulsion of the Jews. However, he accepted the expulsion as a realization of the ideal of Christian *concordia* in its exclusive meaning. The unity of Christian hearts can be achieved if or when the Jews are out of the country. This is a clear display religious and ethnic intolerance. It can be understood as an objection to *tolerantia*, the medieval term meaning the permission given to Jews to live in a certain place at a certain time.

Erasmus’ public influence should not be underestimated. He was one of the most prolific and influential Christian voices of his time. Friedrich Grau Nausea (c.1480-1552), Bishop of Vienna, wrote in his *Monodia* (1537): “To whom do we owe it that in our age the ploughman at his plough thinks on some part of the Gospel? Is it not Erasmus? And that the weaver accompanies his labours at the loom with something from the Gospel? Is it not to Erasmus?”\(^{13}\) The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper defined Erasmus as a colossal intellectual in the history of ideas, the most important intellectual hero of the sixteenth century, a cosmopolitan in an age of rising nationalism, whose intellectuality influenced the Enlightenment movement.

We can therefore conclude that if Erasmus’s attitude toward Jews was hateful, other contemporary humanists held a similar, if not identical, view of humanity. In

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fact, we often do not find racial antisemitism in early modern texts, but only hatred. Nevertheless, the hatred channeled against the Jews was catastrophic in itself and led to terrible results. This persistent hatred, whether combined with racial elements or tied to religion, was the driving force behind the various forms of atrocities that Jews experienced in early modern Europe. Although this paper is not written in the spirit of the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history,” it is appropriate to recall two cases that reflect the outbreak of such hatred. In 1510, thirty-eight Jews were burned to death in Berlin after being convicted of stealing and torturing a Eucharistic host. However, a Christian man had previously confessed to having done it. Then, in 1529, the infamous blood libel of Pezinok (a former Hungarian, now a Slovakian town) occurred. Thirty Jews were publicly burned to death after convicted of murdering a nine-year-old Christian child for ritual purposes.

In conclusion, the use of the term Antisemitismus, after Wilhelm Marr coined it in the 1870s, was not and is not divorced from past traditional anti-Judaism (and its racial elements). On the contrary, the modern term expresses, to a considerable extent, a continuation—in modern tools—of the hatred of the Jews that can be found, among others, in the writings of early modern theologians and Christian humanists. This also emerges from David Nirenberg’s response to a Holocaust survivor who wondered whether he, the persecuted, was a victim of anti-Judaism or antisemitism. Nirenberg’s answer was “both.”

Moreover, hatred is the fundamental element that unites antisemitism and anti-Judaism. The humanist Conradus Mutianus (1470-1526), considered by many to be the third great German humanist after Desiderius Erasmus and Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), is described as “subtle and open-minded…a fine judge of literature and critical of traditional religious practice.” Mutianus wrote: “I hate the Jews, even though most of them are good and have earned merits that I appreciate.”

This manifestation of hatred is arguably a direct anti-Jewish reflection of

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the early modern anti-Jewish mentality and spirit of the age. Today’s scholars are engaged in tracing and discovering notions of determined biological inferiority, ethnological hierarchies, or ethnic characterizations in early-modern Europe. However, the significant role of emotional or inclinational hatred seems to be overlooked. Hatred played an important role, whether or not it was combined with racism. Jonathan Judaken, who rejects the term antisemitism and suggests Judeophobia instead, asks if hatred is the emotion that drives antisemitism. The answer is yes. Call it Judeophobia rather than antisemitism (or anti-Judaism), if you wish; still, hatred was a leading force in driving people to persecute the Jews in Early-modern Europe. As pointed out here, such hatred was not the monopoly of “Christian mobs” driven by “erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament,” as the 1998 publication puts it. Admittedly, it was shared and disseminated by Christian intellectuals and church prelates, Erasmus being an outstanding example.

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21 We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah, section IV (unpaged).