

# **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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> Shulamit Volkov elucidated the

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<sup>1</sup> The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. March 16, 1998 (section IV. Nazi anti-Semitism and the Shoah - unpagged). Issued March 16, 1998 by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. [https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/We\\_Remember.htm](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/We_Remember.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 89, 95 and 112: “It is not absolutely certain that Marr coined the term “anti-Semitism,” but it is very likely.”; Robert Wistrich, “Antisemitism as a Radical Ideology,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 28 (1983), 83-86; idem, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010), 108.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* trans. S. Applebaum, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959; 5<sup>th</sup> reprinting, 1979), 364: “[...] the anti-Semitic literature which flourished at the end of the Hellenistic period...”. On p. 365 Tcherikover uses also “ancient anti-Semitism”; Jerry L. Daniel, “Anti-Semitism in the Hellenistic-Roman Period,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98, (1979): 45-65; Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 277, 289; Robert S. Wistrich (ed.), *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism and Xenophobia* (London:

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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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Routledge, 2013), 74 (Antisemitism and Other -isms in the Greco-Roman World); Menahem Stern, “Antisemitism in Rome,” in Shmuel Almog (ed.), *Antisemitism Through the Ages*, Translated by Nathan H. Reisner. Vidal Sassoon International center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (New York: Pergamon Press, 1988), 13-25; Moshe David Herr, “The Sages’ Reaction to Antisemitism in the Hellenistic-Roman World,” in idem, *Antisemitism Through the Ages*, 27-32. Historian David Engel argues that antisemitism is an arbitrary, vague, and flawed term pointing to a much too wide a range of historical, social, and political phenomena from different periods and places that are not necessarily related to each other. Therefore, he concludes, “no necessary relation among particular instances of violence, hostile depiction, agitation, discrimination, and private unfriendly feeling across time and space can be assumed.” Thus, historical research and writing should avoid the term “antisemitism.” See David Engel, “Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description,” in Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman (eds.) *Rethinking European Jewish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30-53 (53). My paper should be understood as rejecting Angels’ suggestion.

<sup>4</sup> Shulamit Volkov, *Antisemitism Old and New. Trials in Emancipation*. Part II: Antisemitism as a Cultural Code (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß (eds.), *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7-8 (introduction).

<sup>6</sup> Shimon Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*, trans. Anthony Ollcot (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 143. Markish’s lenient judgement of Erasmus’ conception of the Jews is the foundation of a narrative of an a-semitic/tolerant Erasmus, a narrative nurtured and shared by many.

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 essence, 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 substance. 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 sacrifice.”<sup>8</sup>

In a March 1518 letter to the theologian Wolfgang Faber Capito (1478-1541), Erasmus 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*,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 164.

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 21: 3. The passage is in ASD I-3, 246-247: “Iudaeos autem aduersatur Deus, non quod obseruarent legis ritus, sed quod his stulte tumidi negligerent ea, quae Deus maxime vult praestari a nobis ac madentes auaritia, superbia, rapinis, odio, liuore caeterisque viciis existimabant Deum ipsis multum debere, quod diebus festis versarentur in templo, quod immolarent victimas, quod abstinerent a cibis vetitis, quod illi nonnunquam ieiunarent. 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, quum ait *Facere misericordiam et iudicium magis placet Domino, quam victimae.*” ASD = *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969-).*

<sup>9</sup> The Kabbalistic work *Sha'arei Orah* was composed by Joseph Ibn Gikatilla (13<sup>th</sup> century, Spain). The Latin edition was titled *Portae lucis* (Augsburg: Johannes Miller, 1516). The Hebrew original of this work was published in Mantua, 1561.

<sup>10</sup> CWE 5, 347-348; Ep 798: 19-25: “Video gentem eam frigidissimis fabulis plenam nihil fere nisi fumos quosdam obicere; Talmud, Cabalam, Tetragrammaton, Portas Lucis, inania nomina. Scoto malim infectum Christum quam istis neniis. Italia multos habet Iudaeos, Hispania vix habet Christianos. Vereor ne hac occasione pestis iam olim oppressa caput erigat.” 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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?”<sup>13</sup> 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

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–). Ep = *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–58).

See also Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179; Posset, *Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522)*, 863.

<sup>11</sup> CWE 27, 306; ASD IV-2, 80. ASD = *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969–).

<sup>12</sup> CWE 4, 279; Ep 549: 11-13. Ep = *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–58).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Bruce Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus c. 1550-1770* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 10. On Erasmus’ immense influence on modernity, see Bruce E. Mansfield, “Erasmus in the Nineteenth Century: The Liberal Tradition,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 15 (1968), 193-219 and idem, *Phoenix of His Age*.

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,”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.”<sup>18</sup> Mutianus wrote: “I hate the Jews, even though most of them are good and have earned merits that I appreciate.”<sup>19</sup> This manifestation of hatred is arguably a direct anti-Jewish reflection of

<sup>14</sup> Salo W. Baron “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25 (1963): 245–58; reprinted in Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964), 90–106 (96).

<sup>15</sup> On this See Elisheva Carlebach, “Critical Introduction,” in Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books: A Classic Treatise Against Anti-Semitism*, translated and edited by Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>16</sup> On this See Stephen G. Burnett, “Philosemitism and Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1620),” in Irene A. Diekmann and Elke-Vera Kotowski (eds.) *Geliebter Feind Gehasster Freund: Antisemitismus und Philosemitismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Julius Schoeps* (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2009), 135-145 (p.143); Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*, 228-229.

<sup>17</sup> David Nirenberg, “Response to Comments on Review of ‘Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition,’” *Jewish History* 28 (2014), 187-213 (209).

<sup>18</sup> Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher (eds.), *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 474.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Krause and Karl Gillert (eds.) *Der Briefwechsel des Conradus Mutianus Rufus*, 2 vols. (Halle: Verlag Otto Hendel, 1890), no. 229: “Odi circumcisos, quamquam boni sunt plurimi et de me bene meriti.” See also Eckhard Bernstein, “Die Reuchlin-Kontroverse und der Humanistenkreis um Mutianus Rufus,” in Marc Laureys and Roswitha Simons (eds.), *Die Kunst des Streitens: Inszenierung, Formen und Funktionen öffentlichen Streits in historischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2010), 307.

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, it was shared and disseminated by Christian intellectuals and church prelates, Erasmus being an outstanding example.

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Judaken, "Rethinking Anti-Semitism Introduction," *American Historical Review*, Oct. (2018), 1122

<sup>21</sup> *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, section IV (unpaged).