

Robert C. Holub
Nietzsche's Jewish Problem:
Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism
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When I taught the history of philosophy, the only two philosophers' names my students recognized from the start were Plato and Nietzsche. It is hard to overstate the influence of Nietzsche, the master of suspicion, and his critique of modern ethics and religious, social, and political forms of life in the minds of millions of readers and his army of commentators. During the heyday of postmodernism, major philosophers and cultural critics issued new translations, commentaries, and manifestos inspired by Nietzsche. In important ways, we live in a moral and political world shaped by his critique of western traditions. For the scholar or student of Christian-Jewish relations, Nietzsche is important as well. While he rejected Christianity, offering a novel ethical critique of the tradition's most important values, he also rejected Judaism and Jews, seeing them as the origins of the moral decay spread by Christianity.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the meticulous scholarship of Robert Holub, Professor of German at Ohio State University, for his study of the vast body of Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings within the context of nineteenth-century European society. In many ways, Holub does for our historical image of Nietzsche what Jonathan Sperber did in his *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Portrait* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013). By rereading Nietzsche against the background of cultural anti-Judaism and the antisemitic political movements of the late nineteenth century, Holub discovers just how deeply embedded anti-Jewish ideas, images, and tropes were in Nietzsche's discourse, both before and after his membership in Richard Wagner's inner circle. Even in his rejection of the antisemitic political movements of his day, Nietzsche saw them as corrupted by Jewish values. His rejection of Christian morality was based on its implication in the "slave morality" and ascetic priestly moral codes of Second Temple Judaism, communicated via the epistles of the convert Pharisee, Paul, in canonical early Christian scriptures.

Holub both corrects the record in Nietzsche studies and proposes new ways of reading the antimoralist's complex relation with Jews and Judaism. The standard defense of Nietzsche's positive reception among antisemites was that his

sister Elisabeth had pillaged his writings after his loss of sanity, seeking their endorsement by political antisemites and members of the early Nazi movement. The apologists called attention to Nietzsche's break with Wagner's circle, his relations and correspondence with Jewish contemporaries, his rejection of political antisemitic movements, and those places in his writings where he spoke positively of the Jewish character despite centuries of oppression. But Holub documents that Nietzsche's use of Judeophobic stereotypes in his correspondence predated his first encounter with Wagner. In fact, when as a young classics professor in Basel he openly criticized Jews for their influence over the press in a public lecture, Wagner cautioned him to dial back the rhetoric. Afterwards, Jews and Judaism are criticized in the young Nietzsche's publications through the use of "cultural codes" known to antisemites (p. xvii) and the trope of so-called "Socratism" (a phenomenon that undermines ancient Greece's glorious "tragic art" and which he links with Judaism) in *The Birth of Tragedy* (p. 67). In fact, the written record shows it was Friedrich who introduced his sister Elisabeth to antisemitism and drew her into Wagner's circle where she met and married Bernhard Förster, an activist and organizer of political antisemites.

Holub's careful survey of Nietzsche's life, writings, and relationships also reminded me of David Nirenberg's thesis in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013). According to Nirenberg, anti-Judaism as an ideology is part and parcel of the very structure of western civilization, and thus often operates behind the conscious level of ideas in a movement or thinker. To discover anti-Jewish stereotypes in Nietzsche's writings when the author's reputation is built upon his freedom from conformity, his rejection of Christianity (which had long provided theological rationales for anti-Judaism in its doctrines and practices), and his undermining of conventional morality as "the herd morality" may come as a shock to many readers (p. 190). Nietzsche, in his views of Judaism, turns out to have been a product of his era rather than the exception.

One of Nietzsche's insights, based on his reading of Julius Wellhausen, Ernst Renan, and other anti-Jewish biblical scholars, was that the ethical foundation of Christianity goes back to ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism. In fact, Holub agrees with the assessment of Franz Overbeck, Nietzsche's friend, that the philosopher's "anti-Christian attitude is based on anti-Jewish thought" (p. 191). In Nietzsche's critique both Judaism and Christianity purvey a slave morality of resentment toward powerful social and political hierarchies. Jewish and Christian moral traditions undermine natural and noble virtues that are necessary for the flourishing of the Aryan race. Contrary to the regnant theological versions of anti-Judaism in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche emphasized the historical and moral bonds between the two religions before their ways began to part. Holub shows that one must read with greater suspicion Nietzsche's references to Jews and Judaism in his argument for the moral contagion of Christianity, especially their role in the foundation of western moral traditions, and Nietzsche's critique of "Socratism."

Given Nietzsche's influence on Heidegger and other European philosophers that backed the Nazi regime, Holub's book throws new light on the controversy

over the role of Nazi ideology in Heidegger's philosophy. The critique and rejection of many forms of modern culture, society, and politics that Nietzsche and Heidegger share has as one of its historical roots an identification of Jews and Judaism with modernity, especially the political institutions that extended citizenship to Jews and the cultural institutions where (according to antisemites) they played a dominant and domineering role. The idealization of the pre-Socratic Greeks by both Nietzsche and Heidegger was in part a quest for a world without Jews and Judaism.

Do Holub's conclusions mean that one should no longer include Nietzsche's texts in the canon of required readings for a liberal education? He finds no direct connection between Nietzsche's writings on epistemology, the will to power, and eternal recurrence and the anti-Jewish prejudices that haunt his critique of ethics and religion. Furthermore, Holub's analysis should encourage us to include thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger in the canon in order to show how deeply ingrained anti-Judaism is in western civilization. By attending to "cultural codes," Holub demonstrates that even a philosopher like Nietzsche, who was critical of conventional morality and religion, could still endorse and transmit racist ideas and ideals.