

Presenter: Christian Wiese, Goethe University Frankfurt

Title: **“The Political Dimensions of Theology: Christianity and Antisemitism in the Modern Period”**

Panel: Bible, Christianity and Antisemitism

In his book on *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, historian David Nirenberg, reflecting upon the roots of the Shoah, comes to the conclusion that the Nazi genocide, even though it can certainly not be seen as an inevitable result of the long history of the obsessive thinking about Jews and Judaism in Western culture, “was inconceivable and is unexplainable without that deep history of thought”. The history he writes is that of the pervasive influence of anti-Judaism – in its various and changing forms – throughout two millenia, a history that “had encoded the threat of Judaism into some of the basic concepts of Western thought” and thus shaped the mentality that, under specific historical circumstances, enabled an unprecedented crime.¹ Christianity and Christian concepts and images of the Jews were, as he convincingly describes, an integral part of this tradition. Therefore, the awareness of the fateful consequences of the long tradition of Christian anti-Jewish hatred, its indissoluble interaction with the history of antisemitism, and of the role Christian theology and the Christian churches played within the context of the discrimination, persecution, abandonment, and murder inflicted on a large proportion of European Jewry necessarily belongs to the fundamental elements of Christian theological self-reflection after World War II and the Shoah.

The painful insight into the enormous dimension of Christianity’s involvement in and co-responsibility for the Nazi genocide, first only acknowledged by a few theologians who allowed themselves to be fully exposed to the shock engendered by the crimes associated with the symbolic name of Auschwitz and who realized that their own tradition could not remain unchanged by them, became, during the last few decades, a crucial element of the critical reorientation of Christian theology in the course of the Jewish-Christian dialogue since the 1970s and 1980s. The long – and still unfinished – process of recognizing and historically elucidating the Christian guilt, which has found expression in important theological declarations and historical works, has advanced the awareness that Christian tradition’s fundamentally anti-Jewish orientation and the repression and distortion of Jewish self-understanding in the history of Christian Europe – including the catastrophic violence” against Jews connected with this – have caused infinite suffering and forms part of the history of the murderous antisemitism of the Nazis. As a result the Churches, in Germany and in other parts of the world, while still at risk of

¹ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 459.

falling back into the traditional stereotypes of their theology and practice, have gradually proceeded on the path of overcoming what Jules Isaac has once called the 'teaching of contempt.' However, the historical interpretation of the contribution of Christian anti-Jewish ideas, stereotypes, and actions to the horrific events of the twentieth century and the precise analysis of Christian complicity with Nazi antisemitism continues to be controversial, among Jewish and non-Jewish historians alike.

The paper will be devoted to a differentiated look into some of the conflicting views and to an attempt to explore the vexing questions related to the political dimensions of Christian theology with regard to Jews and Judaism in the Modern period. It is based on the assumption that the profoundly disturbing recognition that modern antisemitism emerged in Christian Europe and that the Nazi genocide against the Jews was perpetrated by a heartland of Christian Western culture – which from a purely Christian perspective is a cause for profound shame and dismay – must have implications for the fight against antisemitism in our present societies and that the Christian Churches face a particular responsibility in this regard. For the latter, one important task continues to be to resist the temptation of apologetics concerning the past, to overcome the still rather widespread compulsion to deny or relativize historical guilt, and, instead, to engage, with greater historical honesty, in a self-critical dialogue with those disastrously influential theological thought patterns that belong to the heritage of Christianity and have been among the causes of its catastrophic failure in the face of the unprecedented inhumanity of the Nazi regime.