

Presenter: Catherine Chatterley, University of Manitoba

Title: **“The Religious Dimension of Contemporary Antisemitism”**

Panel: Contemporary History

This presentation will focus on the religious dimension of contemporary forms of antisemitism. Given the goal of the conference, which is to try to devise effective ways to combat antisemitism, it is crucial that scholars understand all of the underlying motivations of this now global phenomenon.

Today, academics are fixated on the problem of racism and many scholars seem to conceive of antisemitism within this limited conceptual framework. Racial antisemitism is only one stage in the long history of a very broad religious-cultural phenomenon, dating from the late 17th century through the Nazi Holocaust, which actually co-existed alongside traditional religious antisemitism and worked in tandem with it. The immediate post-WWII years saw a decline in racist antisemitism (except for the neo-Nazi fringe), but not in traditional religious antisemitism and the anti-Jewish attitudes it inspires. Socalled “racial discrimination” against Jews in housing and employment was made illegal in the late 1960s and 1970s, and in future decades public expressions of antisemitism were no longer seen as acceptable. Today, the Western world is increasingly secular and multicultural, which has allowed for increasing acceptance of Jews and a decline in public expressions of antisemitism that are unrelated to Israel. How many people in Western societies, outside the United States, think in terms of race today; or believe that races actually exist? Race is a Western word and concept that finds little resonance in the non-Western world, where clan, tribe, caste, gender, and religion are much more likely to identify difference and separate people into hierarchies. As a way to understand antisemitism today, the concept of race is inadequate.

This presentation will argue that antisemitism is a religious phenomenon, historically, and remains one today, both in Christian circles and increasingly throughout the contemporary Islamic world. If antisemitism is the product of religious teachings and belief systems, then how is it possible for outsiders to change those teachings and beliefs? If a negative view of Jews and Judaism is the product of religious teaching, then how can we effect any change in attitudes? Antisemitism is a deeply-embedded cultural phenomenon in the West, conditioned by centuries of religious programming and historical experience. Negative perceptions, stereotypes, and attitudes about Jews exist in the minds of people who are no longer religious but still carry the lessons of these teachings, sometimes even unconsciously.

The paper suggests that there is a crisis of understanding today, when it comes to the phenomenon of antisemitism. And those tasked with studying antisemitism are part and parcel of this crisis for a number of reasons, including the current myopic focus on “race” and a lack of awareness and appreciation for religion and its ongoing impact on human thinking and feeling.