

## Jews and Judaism between Bedevilment and Source of Salvation: Christianity as a Cause of and a Cure against Antisemitism

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We begin our talk today with a set of images that are both appalling to modern eyes and strangely consistent with one another: they present Jews and Judaism as intimately linked with the devil, as demonic in their fundamental nature and their individual and collective intentions. While such accusations sound medieval at best, they are widespread even in the present day: as recently as June, 2016, Mahmoud Abbas repeated the accusation that Jews poison wells in a speech to the European parliament.

The association of Jews with the devil appears in Christian, Muslim, and other contexts, as the images on the first slide suggest.

The Christian examples here include an antizionist blog,<sup>1</sup>



a Protestant white supremacist website (to which we will return later),<sup>2</sup>



and a Catholic ritualization of the Stations of the Cross at Kalwaria Zebrzydowska in Poland.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See <https://zionistcrime.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/the-devils-recipe-book.jpg>, <https://zionistcrime.wordpress.com/2012/05/08/thedevilsrecipebook/>, accessed January 31, 2018. This is a one-page site with little external information on the designer's geographic or cultural location.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://smoloko.com/?p=11866>. This site is much more extensive than the previous one.

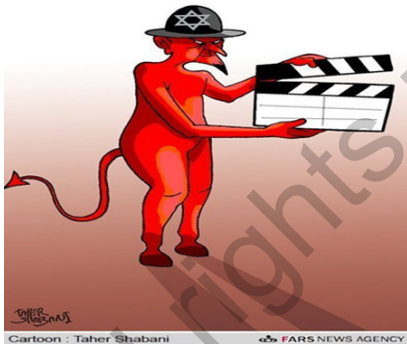
<sup>3</sup> <http://freerepublic.com/focus/news/1622635/posts?page=35>



Another example is explicitly neo-Nazi,<sup>4</sup>



while the last is from an Iranian news agency.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1042495/>. While the imagery in this cartoon is not explicitly demonic, it accompanies a response to circumcision (and the practice of metzitzah b'peh, drawing out a drop of blood by mouth), that states, „This bizarre ritual is not a Covenant with God, it is a pact with the Devil. God doesn't want ritual amputation of infant body parts, no blades, no blood. Jews are in a pact with Satan.” Posted May 20, 2014, by forum member Wulfrick; accessed January 31, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Cartoon by Taher Shabani, published by FARS News Agency; accessed through the UK Media Watch website, whose primary objective is “combatting antisemitism and promoting accurate reporting about Israel in the UK media.” See <https://ukmediawatch.org/2012/09/23/jewish-reaction-to-thousands-of-antisemitic-arab-cartoons-no-riots-no-injuries-no-deaths/>; accessed January 31, 2018.

Why do so many different people and groups slander Jews and Judaism in the same way? Why can the same slander be found in so many different contexts?<sup>6</sup>

In addressing this question, we hope to provide some basic insights into the nature of antisemitism that will allow us to further develop effective strategies to restrain, combat, and end it. For this purpose, we will make some introductory remarks, discuss examples of the bedevilment and demonization of Jews from antiquity until the present day, and present some suggestions for future action against antisemitism.

## 1. Introduction

Philosophers will tell you that cognition is guided by antecedent ideas, and that cognition about particular objects relates back to prior experience or assumptions about them. The phenomenon of antecedent ideas is illustrated by the following joke:

What is the difference between an English retiree, a French retiree, and a German retiree?

The English retiree reads *The Times* while eating breakfast and then goes to the golf club.

The French retiree drinks a glass of wine for breakfast.

And the German retiree takes a blood pressure tablet and sets off to work.<sup>7</sup>

This small joke illustrates nicely how a prejudice directs the way counterparts are perceived. In this case, the stereotype is that Germans are workaholics. We will leave the judgement as to whether this is true to you. For us, it is more important that our joke shows how generalized categories facilitate understanding through the use of antecedent ideas.

It was Karl Jaspers who pointed to the insurmountable divide between the understanding subject and the object of understanding, or what might be classified as the subject-object divide. I, as a subject, view another person as an object of my understanding. To achieve cognition of this object, my preconceptions – based on cultural or religious memories, prior experiences, and things I have seen or been told – equip me to draw conclusions without attention to specifics. Thus, for our joke to work, listeners must already assume – or know that some people around them assume – that all Germans are workaholics.

Preconceptions based on prior experience are not necessarily bad.<sup>8</sup> The assumption that it is dangerous to drive through an intersection when the light is red, because we have seen other

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<sup>6</sup> This paper joins an extensive conversation on the origins of antisemitism. On ancient antisemitism and its origins, key treatments include esp. John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). On the history of scholarly approaches to (ancient) antisemitism, see Schäfer, “Introduction,” in *Judeophobia*, 1-11.

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from <http://www.learn-german-language-online.com/german-jokes.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer controversially argued for the value of a concept he identified as “prejudice” (Vorurteil) in his classic of hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode* (in English, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [2d revised ed.; London and New York: Continuum Press, 1989], 267-304). The implications of this understanding of prejudice were addressed in a series of publications

people do this (or done so ourselves), is a product of past experience that can keep us, and the drivers around us, safe and out of trouble.

Similarly, in interpersonal engagements, preconceptions underlie our earliest rounds of communication, in which we experience an unfamiliar other – sympathetically or not – as an object of understanding and cognition. Such preconceptions are a given in any interaction, but they have the capacity to become problematic very quickly, if our prior sense of understanding is treated as an objective and comprehensive truth, unchangeable in the face of new evidence for the ordinary complexities of lived experience.

In light of these observations with regard to preconceptions, our talk today considers the question of the extent to which Christian religious texts form and transmit negative antecedent ideas of Jews and Judaism, which in turn may determine or provide support for antisemitic perceptions of the Jewish other.

As we will argue today, antisemitic prejudices and the fixed understandings they generate contribute to the cultivation of a symbolic system that is so potent and self-enforcing – if also utterly irrational – that it provides an antisemitic believer with a nearly unbreakable Truth, a paradigm of Jew-hatred as religious conviction.

To describe anti-Semitism as “religious” may be incongruous or even offensive to many. Many or most of us associate the word “religion” with something very positive, while most certainly we all agree that the word antisemitism designates the pinnacle of evil. What, if anything, then could antisemitism have to do with religion?

As an initial answer, we would like to direct your attention towards statistic, namely towards the “Uniform Crime Reporting” of the FBI. For the years 2011-2016, crimes committed against Jews account for more than fifty percent of the FBI’s list of hate crimes arising out of religious bias. To put it another way, religiously motivated hate crimes against Jews occur more often in the U.S. than all other religious hate crimes combined!

The table on the slide includes hate crimes arising out of anti-Jewish, anti-Islamic, and anti-Catholic bias, because for most years these biases head the FBI’s list.<sup>9</sup>

	2011 (1,480 victims)	2012 (1,340 victims)	2013 (1,223 victims)	2014 (1,140 victims)	2015 (1,402 victims)	2016 (1,584 victims)
anti-Jewish	63.2% (936 victims)	62.4% (836 victims)	60.3% (737 victims)	56.8% (648 victims)	52.1% (731 victims)	54.2% (862 victims)

(the “Gadamer-Habermas Debate”), including Jurgen Habermas, *KEY TITLES*; Paul Ricoeur, *KEY TITLES*.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics retrieved from <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2011/narratives/victims>; [https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2012/topic-pages/victims/victims\\_final](https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2012/topic-pages/victims/victims_final); [https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2013/topic-pages/victims/victims\\_final](https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2013/topic-pages/victims/victims_final); [https://ucr.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2014/topic-pages/victims\\_final](https://ucr.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2014/topic-pages/victims_final); [https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/victims\\_final](https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/victims_final). For a fuller picture of the statistics, see also <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/statistics-on-religious-hate-crimes>.

anti-Islamic	12.5%	11.6%	13.7%	16.1%	21.9%	24.8%
anti-Catholic	5.7%	6.4%	6.1%	6.1%	4.3%	4.1%

The extent to which these statistics provide evidence for the amount of anti-Semitism in the U.S. is a matter of debate. But the numbers leave little doubt that in the U.S., religious hatred targets Jews more often than any other religious group, even Muslims.

The FBI's statistics are also significant for another reason. They serve to demonstrate that in the U.S. – as in Austria and elsewhere – hatred of Jews can be, and often is, religiously motivated.

Given the subject of this panel, we will frame our plenary talk on antisemitism specifically as it engages with the Bible and Christianity. To what extent does the demonization of Jews and Judaism in Christian literature contribute to an antisemitic fervor that is best understood as a *religion* of Jew-hatred?

The examples that we will discuss today are drawn from a variety of historical contexts, from antiquity down to the present day. These in no way suggest that all antisemites are Christian or that all Christians are antisemites; in fact, one of our claims will be that the ideas generated in any one set of antisemitic arguments take on a veil of objectivity that allows them to carry weight far outside of their original context. This, indeed, is one of the dynamics that allows antisemitism to resurface repeatedly, often at apparent remove from any visible influences and even in contexts where few or no Jews are actually present.

Classic scholarly treatments of religion note its capacity to shape order out of chaos, creating meaning that is powerful for its adherents. Mircea Eliade famously understood the sacred as a force that turns chaos into cosmos, by creating identifiable religious spheres of experience and meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Anthropologists, responding to and critiquing Eliade's phenomenological appreciation of the sacred, have especially recognized the powerful cultural formations that undergird any notion of religious Truth. Clifford Geertz, famously, defined religion precisely in terms of its apparent objectivity and its capacity for creating a sense of "the real" among its adherents.

Although scholars have critiqued Geertz for some of his treatments of religion, especially his emphasis on its systemic and systematic qualities, this very sense of system can be helpful for a clearer understanding of the potency of antisemitic thought. Geertz describes a religion as:

- (1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959), 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz „Religion as a Cultural System,“ in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed. S. Banton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 1-46, 4. Critiques by Talal Asad. Concern about Geertz's own formation of his ethnographic "other."

Further consideration of these premises will provide a useful backdrop for certain points we wish to argue.

Note, first, Geertz's presentation of religion as "a system of symbols." The implication here is wide-ranging and reflects a focus on culture and its layering of meaning. The founding myths of a religious community, its history, authority-structure, ritual practices, music, art, and specialized language all contribute "symbols" of the sort that Geertz identifies as building-blocks of religious culture. To the extent that multiple religions share a common history and geography, they will also partake of a shared corpus of symbols. One might think here of the spring holiday in which a lamb is sacrificed in order to rescue an enslaved people and provide them with a new covenant of salvation. The symbols – blood, lamb, sacrifice, covenant – are shared, but the systems (which differently underlie the Passover of Jewish tradition and the Easter of Christianity) may both differ from and compete with one another in claims for authenticity. Common religious symbols (cleansing in water, anointing the dead) may arise out of historical contact and influence or independently as unrelated parallels; their significance will lie in how they are integrated into the tradition (the "system") as a whole.

In addition to his trademark appreciation for "thick description," Geertz also highlights an important and often under-recognized phenomenon: the emotional power of religious systems. William James, of course, emphasizes the emotional impact of religious experience, but Geertz's contribution takes a different tack, by acknowledging the two-part dynamic of "moods" (emotional states) and "motivations" (mental states that encourage action, change, or a particular set of thoughts). Geertz also distinguishes between fleeting emotional or intentional states and those that have long-lasting effect. The mental-emotional experience of a religious symbol system can have, as Geertz asserts, "long-lasting" effects, that are not only hard to escape but in fact hard to *want* to escape. Religious symbol systems work because they push our buttons, and they lead us to think that this is both a normal and a desirable reality.

This definition further claims that religious symbol systems postulate a "general order of existence" that is clothed in "an aura of factuality." At this point in the lecture, my (Maxine Grossman's) undergraduate students sometimes become a bit uncomfortable. When I push them to clarify their objections, a few brave students will say, "Geertz seems to be saying that religion *isn't* real, but is only pretending to be, that religious realities don't really exist but just claim to." They're never terribly happy when I confirm that this is Geertz's argument. But Geertz's point remains a vital one, particularly when we turn to a discussion of antisemitism, because the very point of religion, according to this definition, is that it is at once utterly convincing and at the same time grounded in a logic that is only provable within its own cognitive frame. The long-lasting moods and motivations of a given religion are a product of the aura of factuality that the religion articulates. Religions may be authentic or inauthentic, connected to the divine or not, but their efficacy lies in their convincing power.

Geertz's definition concludes with attention to religious exclusivism, which again will be an important component in our discussion of antisemitism.<sup>12</sup> The convincing power of religion – and especially of monotheistic religions – lies in its assertion of reality, unique reality.

Religion thus makes us feel. It makes us act on our feelings. And it leads us to believe that our feelings and actions are confirmed objectively by the evidence around us, which includes a system of symbols so convincing that we understand it as entirely – and uniquely – credible.

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<sup>12</sup> Diana Eck, "Exclusivism"

Disproving any such symbol system is far from easy and hardly a rational process. It requires unraveling the system, demonstrating not only that it is not unique, or even real, but that its very potent symbols have created false feelings and false perceptions. It entails convincing a person that his or her fundamental understanding of the universe is misplaced. It is possible to convince people to abandon strongly-held religious views – by providing evidence, offering an alternative value system, or emphasizing the doubts the person might already have – but by their very nature, such views are easier to retain than to dismiss. This should serve as an indicator of one reason why antisemitism retains its staying power over time and geographic distance.

Religions, as symbol systems, are also potent in their specificity. Cultural memory preserves the elements of these symbol systems, in myths, belief structures, sacred texts, and ritual practices. Exposure to such cultural memory, often from earliest childhood, reinforces for its participants the unique plausibility of the symbol system, by grounding it in specific images and stereotypes, as well as particular narratives that define truth and value, good and evil.

Cultural memory, scholars have noted, externalizes and objectifies particular components of a given culture.<sup>13</sup> An individual's experience (of a moment of grace, for example, or the exposure to wickedness) contributes to that individual's ongoing preconceptions of the world. The collection of "past experiences" of this sort in the context of cultural memory – written, illustrated, or handed down orally – similarly creates a pool of "past experiences" that individuals can claim as their own. That these experiences are not literally "one's own" might make them seem less potent, but in fact the opposite is true: the externalization of themes or images in cultural memory renders them *more* potent, in that they take on "an aura of factuality," an objectivity that arises specifically in light of their coming from the "outside" of one's own experience.

As Aleida Assmann so powerfully observes,

Through culture, humans create a temporal framework that transcends the individual life span relating past, present, and future. Cultures create a contract between the living, the dead, and the not yet living. In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning-production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret.<sup>14</sup>

Aleida Assmann's observation that cultural memory creates a contract between past and future is important for our argument. It is not only, as Geertz argues, that symbol systems call upon people to think and feel in particular ways, and that these thoughts and feelings have significant staying power. Even more to the point, [In the process, as Aleida Assmann has

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<sup>13</sup> Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 109-18. Assmann distinguishes between cultural memory, as preserved in texts and other externalized evidence, and collective memory, which Halbwachs frames as limited by a shared lived experience of three successive generations, or roughly 80 years; see Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 111. Halbwachs here. Additional source material here.

<sup>14</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in Erll and Nünning, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, 97-107, quote on 97.

demonstrated,] cultural memory generates a moral compulsion – individual experience of the collective past implicates those later generations. The evidence from the past *requires* something of them, that they listen and engage with those externalized – that is, real and authoritative – claims from past times.

Even as Assmann notes the potency of cultural memory, she does not imagine later generations as passive recipients of it. To the contrary, the very act of engaging with the past must include critique and comment. Assmann speaks of active and passive forgetting as dynamics that can accompany exposure to cultural memory, and she distinguishes between two central concepts: the canon of active memory, and the archive of memories set aside, preserved for their potential relevance to lived experience but not imbued with authoritative value.

For our own argument, cultural memory reflects both the great difficulty of antisemitic thought and the starting point for a response to it. To the extent that antisemitic cultural formations (arising from biblical and non-biblical sources and preserved and expanded down to the present day) are externalized as authentic responses to the eternal “problem” of the Jews, they hold moral sway over their recipients. But this claim to authority does not exist in isolation, and Assmann points toward a variety of responses to it: active critique, struggle, and head-on engagement. With such a response, it may be possible to de-authorize the received antisemitic tradition, effectively to “decanonize” it and relocate in a separate framing, as received, archived, problematic memory, but not as authoritative truth.

Antisemitic cultural formations – arising from biblical and non-biblical ancient sources – preserve specific and detailed motifs or memes, which are available to successive generations irrespective of their personal connections to one another. In today’s talk, we will address a number of commonplace themes that have been preserved in antisemitic cultural memory. Stereotypes of Jews as destroyers of truth (who suppress the true messianic message of their own Bible) will play a significant role in this discussion, as will the antisemitic treatment of Jews as demonic antitheses to God’s chosen people. We apologize in advance for the examples that we will present. While we would prefer to forget these texts and images or never to have seen them at all, the only way past them is through critiquing them.

As a doctrinaire antisemite, Rudolph Hess provides fascinating evidence for an antisemitic symbol-system that lines up with Geertz’s definition of religion. Hess framed his own acceptance of an antisemitic outlook explicitly in terms of a conversion narrative. In a speech he gave on May 14, 1935, for the German-Swedish society in Stockholm, he stated:

I myself was until then not an antisemite, but on the contrary defended the Jews based on the usual historical theory against their adversaries and persecutors. The facts of 1918 and later were so eye-catching that I was forced to *convert* to antisemitism, even though inwardly I was rather reluctant to revise my hitherto conviction about the innocence of persecuted Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Translation and emphasis A.L. “Ich selbst war bis dahin kein Antisemit, sondern nahm in Gegenteil auf Grund der üblichen Geschichtslehre die Juden gegenüber ihren Widersachern und Verfolgern in Schutz. Die Tatsachen von 1918 und später waren aber so in die Augen springend, daß ich mich zum Antisemitismus bekehren mußte, so sehr ich mich auch innerlich dagegen sträubte, meine bisherige Überzeugung von der Unschuld des verfolgten Judentums berichtigen zu müssen.” Rudolph Hess, “An die Ausländer guten Willens,” in idem, *Reden* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Nachf., 1938), 99-119, the quotations is on p. 104. A strikingly similar example appears in a recent article in the *New Yorker*, which explores the intellectual development of Mike



Several points here deserve attention. First, Hess views his experience as a movement from one belief system to another; he initially defended the Jews, but was later “forced” to change his perspective. His observation that he was initially reluctant to change his perspective lines up with Geertz’s view that religious systems not only appear uniquely real to their followers but also that they create long-lasting motivations. Hess initially *wants* to believe in the innocence of the Jewish people against their persecutors, and he claims that it has taken a lot to change his views.

In the case of Hess, too, we notice that he claims to have made his conversion by rational means: the introduction of evidence that is to his mind new and convincing leads him to analyze his previous understanding of the Jews and to find it inaccurate. But we would argue that this language of rationality actually covers over a much less rational thought-process. His sense that “the facts of 1918 and later were so *eye-catching*” suggests that they captured his thought process emotionally, that they led him from one set of long-lasting perceptions to a very different set. This is not a process of rational education, but rather one of emotional – religious – transformation.

Hess’ language of conversion is even stronger in the original German than in the English translation. It demonstrates that Hess perceived or at least framed his own antisemitism as a religion. After all, he “converted” to it.

The “powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations” of antisemitism are evident in its many historical iterations, from Hecataios and Manetho in the third century B.C.E., down to the present day. They contribute to slanderous views of Jews that not only claim factuality but take on an uncorrectable conviction, which in turn generates a remarkably flexible, long-lived religious credo: that Jews are evil and destroy anything that is good.

Returning momentarily to the problem of preconception we should remember that especially in situations of crisis, communities consider the other, the stranger, as a foreign object that is threatening in its very existence. Religious symbol systems provide contexts for understanding these treacherous others, enabling their adherents to create a sense of stability in the midst of chaos, and also to define and confirm their own identity, through rejection of the other. In times of economic crisis, it is, for instance, much easier to hold the collective Jew as the paradigmatic other responsible for an economic catastrophe than to direct blame on the less immediately-visible systems and decision-makers who are specifically at fault. Crises are thus catalysts, not only for change, but also for continuity and revisiting of negative prejudices with respect to the Jewish other.

We have no interest in condemning Christianity, in this paper or in general. But it must be recognized that Christian texts form a religious memory that provides and communicates, among other things, a religious symbolic system of Jew-hatred. This religious symbolic system provided and provides the antisemitic believer with preconceived interpretive grids that are especially reassuring in situations of crisis. Among these preconceived interpretive

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Enoch, an American white supremacist. He describes attending a meeting with Jewish political activists: „An overwhelming sense of loathing washed over me like an awesome wave . . . the people I was around suddenly seemed twisted and horrible. A revelatory religious experience is the closest thing I can compare this experience to.“ See Andrew Marantz, “Birth of a Supremacist,” *The New Yorker* (Oct. 16, 2017), 26-32, quote on 29.

grids are dualistic symbolic systems that distinguish the subjects who perceive (Christian partakers of God's truth) and the objects that are perceived (the Jews, as denizens of a negative other-world). Christian texts provide language for envisioning the Jews as the sons of the devil, who conspire to murder and destroy anything of positive value.

Hatred of Jews is not a product of the specific moments in which Christian texts have been written, although those moments and those texts have contributed to the symbol system of antisemitism. Rather, it is the transmission of those texts and symbols, over centuries and millennia, in highly specific and at times highly diverse social contexts that has allowed for the continuity of antisemitic messages. The individual claims of Christian texts, re-read and reconsidered by successive generations of Christians – and further claimed and transformed by Muslims and post-Christian antisemites – provide one engine that allows antisemitism to flourish. Religious disciples of antisemitism read their own reality in light of the symbolic systems that Christianity (and Islam) have transmitted, and this in turn creates a context in which they can blame the collective Jew for any and all failings around them.

## **2 The Bedevilment of Jews in (Late) Ancient Christianity**

Our first sample text comes from the gospel of John. As the latest of the four canonical gospels, John often presents exacerbated versions of the early Christian ideas that came before him. Thus, in its treatment of conflicts between Jesus and “the Jews” (as if Jesus himself were not a Jew throughout his life), the gospel of John escalates the fictional conflict even more than the synoptics did in their earlier presentations. John's treatment of this account is unique in its claims that the Jews plotted to murder Jesus (John 7:1-3; 8:20-47) and in fact attempted do so unsuccessfully two times (John 8:48-59; 10:22-30). The peak of this narrative plot is the passion story, which is of profound importance to so many believing Christians. Christians and other readers of the gospel thus absorb, at this most intense narrative point, the slanderous claim that the Jews would have killed Jesus if they had been able to.

The narrative plot of an escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jews in the gospel of John has nothing to do with historical reality. It is a means by which the author of the gospel unfolds an antithesis defining Christian identity in opposition to a negative otherworld. This is particularly evident in the infamous account in John 8.

37 I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. 38 I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.” 39 They (the Jews) answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, 40 but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are indeed doing what your father does.’ They said to him, ‘We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.’ 42 Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. 44 *You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires.* He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why

do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.’<sup>16</sup>

The gospel of John presents a sharp and clear duality here, between the historical people of the Jews, who belong to the negative pole of his dualistic worldview, and the Christians who will replace them.<sup>17</sup> The historical Jewish people are depicted as representatives of the devil who reject the truth of the Johannine gospel and hence murder Jesus. Christianity, in this formulation, is the representative of the positive pole of a dualistic universe and Judaism is the negative. The Johannine gospel thereby severs any ties between Christianity and Judaism, defining Christian identity and Christians in opposition with Judaism, by means of slander and Jew hatred.

In this process, the gospel of John takes ownership of and transforms the religious symbol of “the Jews.” No longer understood as the keepers of God’s covenant, “the Jews” of this gospel are instead preserved in the cultural memory of nascent Christianity as followers of a demonic deity. Erasing the Jewishness of Jesus, of the disciples, and of much of the early church, John’s dualistic worldview creates a bedeviled “other” in “the Jews” of the negative otherworld, the opponents of positive Christianity.

The impact of the gospel of John is evident at various points in Christian history, nowhere more vividly than in the sermons of John Chrysostom. In the years 386-387 C.E., Chrysostom gave eight sermons *Adversus Judaeos* in the city of Antioch. These sermons were intended to respond to a problem in Chrysostom’s parish, that a significant number of his flock were participating in synagogue services, celebrating Jewish festivals, and observing Jewish fasting. Chrysostom’s sermons treat this Christian fascination with Judaism as a danger not only for the so-called Judaizing Christians but in fact for Christianity itself.

Like the gospel of John, then, Chrysostom needed to emphasize the importance of separations between Jews and Christians and the incompatibility of their two religious systems. His response is not a mild criticism of those Christians that are fascinated with Judaism but an attack on Jews that includes condemnation, abuse, and outright slander. The Jews, says Chrysostom, are “pigs” and “goats” (I:4,1), a “pack of hunting dogs” (II:4), and many other things. Christians are wrong to engage with them, but are excused for their misbehavior and assured of clemency and remission upon their return.

Chrysostom’s dualistic view treats Jews and Christians not only as opposites in a worldview of good and evil, but as inhabitants of entirely separate realms, one heavenly and the other satanic. Jews are robbers of the soul, and the synagogue is a dwelling place of demons (I:3,3). The devil seduces Christians to go there (I:3,5), and once they have crossed the threshold, they enter a realm of evil where only the sign of the cross could protect them.

But now you see your own brother being dragged off unjustly to the depth of destruction. And it is not the executioner who drags him off, but the devil ... If he will stand fast in his obstinate resolve, I shall choose to risk my life rather than let him enter the doors of the synagogue. (*Adv. Jud.* I:4, 6)

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<sup>16</sup> Translations of the New Testament are according to NRSV.

<sup>17</sup> See in particular Adele Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

But how will you go into the synagogue? If you make the sign of the cross on your forehead, the evil power that dwells in the synagogue immediately takes to flight. If you fail to sign your forehead, you have immediately thrown away your weapon at the doors. Then the devil will lay hold of you, naked and unarmed as you are, and he will overwhelm you with ten thousand terrible wounds. (*Adv. Jud.* VIII:8,7)

Chrysostom's slander of the Jews not only resembles the gospel of John in its bedeviling language but in fact draws upon the Christian cultural memory that includes John, framing a prejudicial antecedent conception. This conception of the Jew serves equally well to frame any Christians who pursue a fascination with Judaism. It is this cultural memory on which Chrysostom relies in responding to the crisis of his own diminishing parish.

As a consequence of his slander and his false accusations of deicide, Chrysostom goes much further than the gospel of John. Chrysostom calls for physical violence against the Jews of Antioch. He tries to instigate the mass murder of all Jews of this city. What Chrysostom asks of his parishioners is nothing less than a late ancient pogrom.

Although such beasts (scil. the Jews) are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter. This is why Christ said: "But as for these my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slay them" (Luke 19:27). (*Adv. Jud.* I:2,6)

Our excerpts from Chrysostom's sermons against the Jews leave little doubt what motivates Chrysostom's Jew-hatred. In his eyes, the Christian fascination with things Jewish endangers Christianity. For him, in itself and as the quintessential negative "Other," Judaism threatens to taint Christianity by allowing for the intersection of Christian good with Jewish "Evil." In his fear, Chrysostom goes to any length of hatred to respond to that illusionary threat.

The anxieties of the gospel of John and the sermons of John Chrysostom continue to resonate in antisemitic thought up to the present day. Two examples suffice to illustrate this point.

### 3 The Bedevilment of Jews among the Nazis

The first example is a children's picture book published by the infamous Stürmer Press and written by Elvira Bauer.<sup>18</sup> Its title "Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid" ("Trust no fox in a heathland and a Jew with his oath") is adapted from an antisemitic pamphlet by Martin Luther.<sup>19</sup>

Bauer titles her book's introductory poem

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<sup>18</sup> Elvira Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid* (Nürnberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1936).

<sup>19</sup> *Trau keinem Wolf auf wilder Heiden // Auch keinem Juden auf seine Eiden // Glaub keinem Papst auf sein Gewissen // Wirst sonst von allen Drein beschissen.* (Aus: *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen*, 1543).

### The Father of the Jews is the Devil

At the creation of the world  
The Lord God conceived the races:  
Red Indians, Negroes, and Chinese,  
And Jew, too, the rotten crew.  
And we were also on the scene:  
We Germans midst this motley medley-  
He gave them all a piece of earth  
To work with the sweat of their brow.  
But the Jew went on strike at once!  
For the devil rode him from the first.  
Cheating, not working, was his aim;  
For lying, he got first prize  
In less than no time from the Father of Lies.  
Then he wrote it in the Talmud.

By the banks of Pharaoh's Nile  
Pharaoh saw this folk, and said:  
"I'll torment the lazy blighters,  
These people shall make bricks for me."  
The Jew did this all wailing and whining,  
Never was there such cursing and swearing,  
With bent backs and over-big slippers.  
Even today we see them shambling  
With lip hanging down and great red noses  
And looking daggers, flashing hate.  
They owe Pharaoh thanks,  
Who trounced them soundly for their  
pranks.  
The Jews soon had enough of that!  
The Devil brought them to Germany.  
Like thieves they stole into our land  
Hoping to get the upper hand.<sup>20</sup>



Bauer's distortion of the Exodus story is characterized by antisemitic stereotypes from Nazi propaganda such as the supposed physiognomic characteristics of Jews. In her slander, Jews are lazy, but Pharaoh puts them to work. The first exile in Egypt is described – if you can forgive the harsh words – as a kind of concentration camp. Israel did not do slave labor in Egypt, but Pharaoh introduced it to teach the Jews how to work.

This slander is reminiscent not only of the Nazis' lie about the educational function of concentration camps but also of the bedevilment slanders of the gospel of John and the sermons against the Jews by Chrysostom. Bauer's treatment of the Jewish other draws upon prejudices and religious symbols from this cultural memory. For Bauer, the devil and not God brought the Jews out of Egypt. From Egypt, they travel not to the land of Israel (unmentioned

<sup>20</sup> Elvira Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs*, no page number. English translation by Randall Bytwerk by <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>. Last accessed June 7<sup>th</sup> 2015.

in her poem) but directly to Germany. Further resonance appears in Bauer's explicit allusion to John 8:44 with the title of her poem: "The Father of the Jews is the Devil."

As in the other texts we have discussed today, Bauer employs the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews for the purpose of identity building. While the gospel of John and Chrysostom depicted the Christians as the positive opponents of the Jews, Bauer does the same with the Germans. Retaining the antisemitic creed that the Jews are sons of the devil, she replaces the positive roles of Jesus and/or Christianity in the gospel of John with the Germans in her composition. It is now the Germans whose positive identity is created by applying the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews to the Jewish other.

Bauer's children's book is not an isolated event. It is symptomatic of the religious ideology of Nazi Germany. Two examples may suffice to demonstrate how widespread the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews was during the Nazi period in German literature.

Polemicizing against the supposed lies and slanders of the Jews, Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*:

In this he (scil. the collective Jew) flinches away from nothing and becomes so vast that nobody should be surprised why with our people the personification of the devil as the emblem of all evil takes the living shape of the Jew.<sup>21</sup>

A second example appears in a book series, Pamphlets of the SA, edited by Nazi journalist and writer Rudolf Elmayer von Vestenbrugg, under the pseudonym Elmar Vinibert von Rudolf. Elmayer von Vestenbrugg wrote the first volume of the book series himself and titled it after the infamous Jews' Mirror of Johannes Pfefferkorn, *Der Judenspiegel: Judentum und Antisemitismus in der Weltgeschichte*. In his book, Elmayer unfolds the idea that the history of the world is patterned by recurring conspiracies of Judaism to gain world dominance, and that each such conspiracy must be defeated by a pure Nordic Aryan people. In the introduction to this book, Elmayer von Vestenbrugg characterizes the basic conflict of history as follows:

As the son of the Satan-quality, Ahasver moves through world history. Forever under a different name but always remaining the same; in perpetuity reaffirming the truth and always lying. If lying implies the death of the Nordic people, it is the vital principle of Judaism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (514th-518th ed.; Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Frz. Eher Nachf., 1940), 355: Hier schreckt er vor gar nichts zurück und wird in seiner Gemeinheit so riesengroß, daß sich niemand zu wundern braucht, wenn in unserem Volke die Personifikation des Teufels als Sinnbild alles Bösen die leibhaftige Gestalt des Juden annimmt.

<sup>22</sup> Rudolf von Elmayer von Vestenbrugg, *Der Judenspiegel: Judentum und Antisemitismus in der Weltgeschichte* (2. Aufl.; Kampfschriften der Obersten SA.-Führung 1; München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP Frz. Eher Nachf., 1938), 7 (published under the pseudonym Elmar Vinibert von Rudolf):

„Als Sohn der Satan-Natur zieht Ahasver durch die Weltgeschichte. Ewig unter anderem Namen und doch immer sich gleich bleibend; ewig die Wahrheit betuernd und immer lügend. Wenn Lüge den Tod der nordischen Menschen bedeutet, so ist sie für das Judentum das Lebenselement.“

### 3 The Bedevilment of the Jews in White Supremacist Christianity

Our last example consists of two internet memes from the white supremacist neo-nazi webpage Smoloko.com. The webpage was founded and is run by Scottie Spencer. Its self-description leaves little doubt that Smoloko adheres to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

The first meme associates the Western Wall, one of the most sacred sites of Judaism, with the devil. Spencer, using the outdated expression “Wailing Wall,” labels this sacred site the seat of Satan, in terms reminiscent of John Chrysostom’s slander of the synagogue as the dwelling of demons.

In the second meme Spencer’s reliance on religious cultural memory is made explicit. Here he quotes the Gospel of John to describe Jews as the children of Satan. His treatment is resonant with early Christian themes, including the accusations that the Jews as a collectivity would have rejected Jesus and would have crucified him.

Spencer’s antisemitic memes dig deeply into the religious and cultural memory of the Christian West, going back to ancient times. He uses these religious symbols to explain the purportedly enormous power of the Jewish collectivity. Here again, antisemitism is connected with a fear of external threat. For Spencer, drawing upon larger conspiracy theory – and another set of antisemitic tropes – the Jews would run “the new media, Hollywood, Wall Street,” and “the government.”<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, Spencer’s antisemitism is specific and local. His roots in Youngstown, Ohio, and the concern there for the economic decline of the region (the so-called “Rust Belt”) are as important to his thinking as the symbols of cultural memory are to its representation. The impoverishment of his home region and the identity crisis that results from it might be specific to the experience of the predominantly white population of the Rust Belt, but the articulation of antisemitism that follows upon it relies upon religious and other symbolism from a larger cultural memory.

Scottie Spencer’s engagement with this anti-Semitic cultural memory does not end with his quotation of the gospel of John. As another antisemitic web page observes, Spencer actually had access to Chrysostom’s *Sermons Against the Jews*, which was found in his car at the time of his arrest on charges of ethnic intimidation.<sup>24</sup> We can only speculate on the possibility that this text had deep influence on Spencer’s thought process; at minimum, however, he knew that this was a text that was *supposed* to shape his thought.<sup>25</sup>

We must return here to notions of cultural memory and antisemitism as religion. Preconceptions about Jews – as demonic or bedeviled – are easily accessible in Christian cultural memory and in popular culture outside of Christian circles. An antisemite need not sit down and read Chrysostom – or even the gospel of John – to have access to these tropes,

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<sup>23</sup> <http://smoloko.com/?p=16788>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.henrymakow.com/2017/04/the-man-behind-the-memes.html>.

<sup>25</sup> The ownership of such a text may identify a person cultural or socially more than ideologically or intellectually. An interesting parallel can be found in the 1980s “Satanic Panic” in the United States, where accused criminals were sometimes labeled Satanists if investigators found copies of *The Satanic Bible* in their possession. Such texts must be understood as cultural objects that participants in a specific thought-world feel the need to claim, irrespective of whether they also serve as doctrinal texts whose meanings they plumb and discuss.

because their transmission continues among antisemites (and indeed among Christian Bible-readers, even those who are not antisemitic).

The externalization of these tropes, in fact, lends them even greater strength: as examples of “objective” realities or inherited truths, they provide antisemites with “conceptions of a general order of existence” (as Geertz would have it), that are not only “uniquely realistic” but also provide a source for deep and “long lasting moods and motivations.” Inherited cultural memory takes on the potency of unique reality and truth, which participants need not *believe* – an excessive religious step – because they are simply there to *perceive* and acknowledge. The truth-value of even the most extreme antisemitic claims – within a closed system of thought – is obvious and unchangeable to a believing, perceiving antisemite.

For all that there are good reasons to distinguish racial antisemitism from its religious antecedents, it is important to see the overlap between the two in the claims of Scottie Spencer. And Spencer is not an isolated example in his use of the religious symbol of the bedevilment of the Jews; he is, instead, the tip of a large iceberg. Consider just one other such example, from the *New History of the Jews*, by the American antisemitic writer and Shoah denier Eustace Mullins.

Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin are dead, but their heritage of Jewish terror is with us today. *All power to the Jews!* This was the Satanic pact which Roosevelt and Churchill signed, and because of it, each of these men died cursing the Jews, facing eternal damnation. All was ashes in their mouths, and they faced eternity with the terrible realization that for a few young girls and some bottles of whiskey, they had sold their peoples into slavery to the Jews. To those who know the history of mankind, there is nothing new or shocking in this. ... Throughout history, this sordid tale is repeated again and again, and throughout history, for the leaders and for the led, the message of Jesus Christ remains the same, “Turn away from Satan and follow Me.”<sup>26</sup>

Far from idle or isolated ramblings, which these assertions might have been in past decades, today’s technology brings this writing easily to the masses. Mullins’ book is available, free of charge, on the internet and is sold in hardcopy today by Omnia Veritas press.<sup>27</sup>

### **5 Policies against Christian Anti-Semitism**

The ideas of antisemites about Jews are irrational and full of religious fervor. Ancient and late ancient antisemitism, as well medieval, modern, and contemporary antisemitism can thus be described as a religious symbolic system that is united not by a positive confession but by a negative belief system. One of lines in the creed of antisemitism is the confession that “the Jews are the sons of the Devil.” Ancient and late ancient as well as medieval and modern Antisemitism can thus be described as a negative religion.

In tracing these examples of the religious symbol of the Jews as the children of the devil and as devil worshippers from ancient Christian literature to Nazi and contemporary Christian Jew-hatred, we hope to have shown that Christian antisemites draw on a system of negative

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<sup>26</sup> Eustace Mullins, *Mullins’ New History of the Jews* (Staunton: *The International Institute of Jewish Studies*, 1968), 7-8 (the supposed international institute of Jewish Studies was not an academic institution but was situated at Mullins’ home address).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.omnia-veritas.com/>



religious symbols to perceive the Jewish other. Their fervor is irrational, but it is grounded in a set of inherited lore, which they apply to the Jewish other with unshattered conviction.

This treatment of antisemitism in terms of religious truth-value is both troubling and potentially beneficial. Its trouble lies in the potency of religious commitment, which people feel in their deepest selves, in response to their experiences of family, education, and cultural memory. But people – and not only antisemitic people – do convert from one meaning-making system to another, and the very core of cultural memory that renders Christian belief potent for antisemites also retains deep possibility for rejections of their claims. Christianity itself, with its complex heritage of cultural memory, contains the tools to combat Christian antisemitism and bring it to an end.

### **5.1 Converting the Anti-Semitic Believer**

Theologically, culturally, and socially, Christian communities have within them the tools to fight against this longest hatred. Christian churches have the potential to offer a religious symbol system characterized by love, acceptance, and tolerance in general and by appreciation of the Jewish other in particular, as a representative of Christianity's parent religion and sometimes challenging sibling religion as well. The very universality of the Christian gospel brings with it the claim – and the ongoing challenge – to love or at least tolerate those who have not yet entered the fold. For every accusation of bedevilment in Christian Scripture there is a claim to universal love; for every text of *Adversos Ioudaios* literature, there is a doctrine of mutual respect.

How, then, should Christians – and others – engage with this cultural heritage? What are some tools for transformation in the future?

### **5.2 Policies to Remove Anti-Semitism out of the Christian Religious Memory**

Given two thousand years of Christian transmission of antisemitic religious symbols, it follows that the Christian churches have a responsibility to undo some of the work these symbols have done. To eliminate Jew hatred from Christian religious memory requires many short, middle, and long-term measures.

Symbol systems are constantly in flux, and their symbols are constantly being built up, reworked, filed away for another time, or even dropped completely. Aleida Assmann speaks of this in terms of an active “canon” of memory, and a subtext or backgrounded “archive” – of the things that have been forgotten, for now, or placed aside to be addressed with more caution and concern.

Here in addition it may be useful to think in terms of a *geniza* of memory. The Jewish *geniza* is a storage house, for texts that have become damaged beyond acceptable use. These texts are not intended to be housed indefinitely in such a storage space, but only until the time when they can be respectfully buried, alongside the body of an especially pious community member, for example, or at minimum in the communal burial ground.

While canon and archive are potent images, there is some moral justice in imagining a *geniza* of antisemitic tropes, a place where hatred can go to die and be buried. But symbol systems hate a vacuum as much as nature does, and hateful symbols cannot simply be purged: they must be replaced by equally potent, equally externalized, equally – if you will – *true* symbols from the same shared cultural memory.

To that end, we wish to conclude our presentation by opening up discussion. Might we consider pursuing any of the following suggestions, for “converting” antisemitism through the power of already existing cultural memory?

- Translations of the New Testament need to be accompanied by marginal glosses and introductions that emphasize continuity with Christianity’s Jewish heritage and identify antisemitic passages and warn readers about their lies and slander. The same is true for other Christian literatures with antisemitic content.
- Liturgical texts need to be discussed and rethought, to replace or remove the antisemitic elements they contain. Such elements should be replaced with statements depicting Judaism as Christianity’s older and ongoing sibling.
- Other antisemitic texts in the Christian heritage need to be blacklisted. Texts like Chrysostom’s sermons against the Jews, Luther’s anti-Semitic writings, and more recent Christian literature need to become the object of historical study and analysis, not everyday Christian reading. Instead, texts like *Nostra Aetate* in the Catholic Church and similar statements from other Christian traditions should be as much highlighted as earlier parts of the Christian cultural memory that express respect and appreciation of Judaism.
- Future explicit and official ecclesiastical statements need to take into account the historical relationships of Judaism and Christianity and to reject Christian supersessionism and antisemitic religious symbols including the bedevilment of the Jews and the blood libel.
- Christians also need to acknowledge that Judaism is a living religion whose heritage has grown and developed in its own ways for the two millennia since the birth of Christianity. Christians need to make an effort to engage with their Jewish neighbors and to understand them as members of a different religious community.
- Christian thought needs to be thoroughly grounded in its Jewish heritage.
- Christian theologians, teachers of religion, and ministers need to be educated about the antisemitic elements of their heritage by way of mandatory class requirements during their studies, and Christian ministers and teachers of religion need to teach what they have learned about antisemitism in their school classes and parishes.
- Christianity as a religion of love must guide the Christian antisemitic believer to the sources of that Christian love and respect for the other even in the presence of hatred, slander, and persecution. Only by guiding the Christian anti-Semitic believer to authentic sources of Christian love will it be possible to shatter the otherwise unshatterable, irrational conviction of the antisemite that all Jews are bad. Such guidance is a first step toward converting Christian hatred of Jews to Christian appreciation of Jews.
- The canonical writings of the antisemitic believers (such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*) need to be publicly denounced by the churches as the unholy writ of a negative religion.
- Internet repositories such as Google or archive.org must be discouraged from providing religious and other antisemitic texts for free download online. Such texts should be archived and made available to specialized researchers and others with serious, responsible interests in them.
- Webpages such as smoloko.com should be denied URLs, and internet search engines should not include them into their searches.

Not everyone will agree with all of these arguments – and some of them are more feasible than others – but together these approaches offer a path for transformation, for the eradication of antisemitic religious symbols, and the “conversion” of antisemites from their negative religion to another meaning-making system, supported by different aspects of the very religious memory that Christianity has previously provided.

To make a long story short, we ask that Christianity take seriously its claim to be a religion of love and take action to practice that love, in active resistance to this longest of religious, communal hatreds.

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