

Book Reviews



David Patterson

Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) xi + 321 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-04074-8 (Hardcover).

In this book, the author tackles the question of the causes of anti-Semitism from a new perspective. His chief thesis is that anti-Semitism is rooted in the anti-Semites' desire to become like God themselves, and that by killing the Jews—God's witnesses—they are killing God (who, it is said in the *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 12:6, cannot exist without his witnesses) in order to become as God. As the author says, the ancient temptation to kill God reemerges in the temptation of “killing the Jews, who proclaim that we are not God. Hence the exterminationist element of the more extreme forms of anti-Semitism: killing the God of Abraham requires killing the children of Abraham” (p. 17). Here is some more textual evidence of the author's main thesis: anti-Semites “may not have the power to kill God the Creator and Lawgiver, but [...] have the power to destroy His children, beginning with His chosen, the Jews” (p. 18); “the desire to kill God is a desire to kill the Jews” (p. 21); “The evil of anti-Semitism lies in the egocentric will to deicide, which shows itself concretely as a will to homicide: killing God requires killing human beings, from Abel onward” (p. 23). Anti-Semitism, in other words, “is an attempt to expel the Divine Presence from creation” (p. 25). It is really “the temptation to see oneself as God, which lies at the core of anti-Semitism” (p. 32). Needless to say, in addition to assuming the existence of God, this thesis also assumes that the anti-Semite believes in the existence of God.

Patterson opposes his “metaphysical” explanation to other kinds of explanation: theological, sociological, ideological, psychological, and composite. In his view, all these kinds of explanation fail to account for a dimension of the problem that the metaphysical explanation succeeds in explaining. One may wonder how the author's explanation is not reducible to a psychological one, but he insists that the metaphysical explanation is not a mere analogy or metaphor for a psychological patricidal desire. He opposes his explanation to

that of Freud, who, in *Moses and Monotheism*, says that “Because Judaism was the father religion and Christianity the son religion, [...] Christianity had to kill the father” (p. 42). For Freud, the patricide is merely symbolic, thus psychological. In contrast, Patterson argues literally “that hatred of the Jews is a hatred of the commanding covenantal God” (p. 44). The anti-Semites’ “effort to rid their world of the Jews amounted to an effort to rid their world of God” (p. 76). The author supports his assertion by appealing to Jewish sages: “As many of the sages have said, to launch an assault on the Jewish people is to launch an assault on the Holy One” (p. 77). Furthermore, his argument “situates the metaphysical origin of anti-Semitism in the soul and not in the psyche” (p. 41). Since the soul is a metaphysical entity, i.e., an entity that persists beyond space and time, the author considers justified the claim of a “metaphysical origin”: “anti-Semitism has a metaphysical origin: it is not of this world, any more than the human soul is of this world. With its origins lying outside the ontological coordinates of space-time, anti-Semitism reveals itself in the mad struggle to return being to the chaos and void that God overcomes in the act of creation” (p. 24). Thus, on this assumption—and on this assumption alone—the explanation cannot be merely psychological; it must be “metaphysical.”

According to Patterson, the entire history of Western thought leads in a straight line to the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism has its historical roots in the split between Jerusalem, a state grounded in strict obedience to revelation, and Athens, which, in contrast, is grounded in free inquiry and dialogue. The Western rationalist project brought the rise of modern philosophy, which culminated in Cartesianism, which in turn led to the modern conception of the ego. The discovery of the ego, which is an isolation from the holy, eventually transmogrifies into a rejection of God: “In the Cartesian equation of thought with being, God is usurped by a counterfeit I, an illusory and delusional I, the I who would be as God—in short: the I of the anti-Semite” (p. 112). The author suggests that “[a]nti-Semitism has its metaphysical origin in this ‘very egoism of the ego’ that eclipses the light of the Holy One. With the waxing of the Cartesian *lumen natural*, or ‘natural light,’ there is a waning of the divine light, so that modern thought slips into the darkness, into the evil, of egocentric anti-Semitism” (p. 112). The rationalist revolts against the Jew, because “nothing is more threatening to the natural light of autonomous reason than the heteronomous Judaism embodied in the Jewish people” (p. 112). In this understanding of history “lies the danger that the presence of the Jew poses for modern philosophy. And the philosopher knows it” (p. 113). Thus, “if it was to be true to itself, the philosophy of the Enlightenment *had* to be anti-Semitic” (p. 114). The dilemma is to either accept the light of revelation or the truth of rationality. If we choose rationality, we must reject revelation wholesale, and

thereby Judaism. Anti-Semitism is thus portrayed as a natural *causatum* of philosophical—or, even, simply rational—thinking.

In German philosophy, the tendency toward Cartesian egoism occasioned an explicit rejection of God. The author interprets Ludwig Feuerbach's atheism, for instance, as essentially anti-Semitic (p. 121). He offers a similar reading of Nietzsche, for whom, he says, "God is what one aspires to become in a self-apotheosis into the *Übermensch*, and other human beings are mere *Untermenschen*. With this philosophical heritage, the Jews would be logically counted as chief among the *Untermenschen*, inasmuch as they pose the greatest, most fundamental threat to the birth of the new Messiah, the mangled, from the womb of modern philosophy" (p. 124). Nietzsche's pronouncement of God's death is *ipso facto* interpreted as an anti-Semitic decree, because by "Killing God, man becomes the mass murderer of men, beginning with the Jews" (p. 123). Those "guided by an abstract mode of thought [...] could not but categorize the Jews as the greatest of all possible threats" (p. 132). This is because "the Jew is the enemy of thought, that is, of thought that would eliminate God by thinking Him into irrelevance" (p. 133).

National Socialism is thus considered a logical outcome of German philosophy; Fichte, who stood on Kant's shoulders, is interpreted as the "first National Socialist philosopher" (p. 114), and, in an earlier book, the author went as far as saying that Hitler was begotten by Goethe.¹ Ultimately, National Socialism is the logical entailment of the Western philosophical tradition rooted in ancient Greece: "What began with thinking God out of the picture ended with shoving the Jews into the gas chambers" (p. 109). Sure, there was a multitude of conditions involved—"National Socialism emerged from the convergence of philosophical and political, cultural and religious expressions of Jew hatred" (p. 135). But, according to the author, these various conditions in Germany were all results of the Western rationalist *Weltanschauung*: "modern philosophy paved the way to [these] social, cultural, and political manifestations of anti-Semitism. Under the Third Reich the Nazis continued to build on those philosophical foundations" (p. 138). Anti-Semitism "is not the product of historical, social, or political circumstances. Those contingencies, rather, merely provide the occasion for the emergence of a Jew hatred that runs much deeper, that is rooted in the soul of the child of Adam who would be as God" (p. 277). The Nazis "understood that the presence of the Jews in the world is the presence of the Holy One in the world" (pp. 135–136), and by killing them they sought to kill this presence that was threatening the Greco-Roman philosophical

1 David Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), 229, note 2.

foundations that they were building upon. The Nazis, the author says in an earlier book, “are the end product of a philosophical tradition forever hostile toward the Jewish tradition.”² A case in point is Heidegger, who, “in his association with the Nazis, [...] simply followed his premise to its logical conclusion” (p. 139).

The author further applies this scheme of analysis to Muslim anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism of Islamic fundamentalists, who happen to be great consumers of anti-Semitic literature such as *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is also metaphysical: “for Islamic Jihadists, Jew hatred is a metaphysical category, a first principle, that defines the essence of their thinking. And this metaphysical nature of their anti-Semitism stems from anti-Semitism’s metaphysical origin” (p. 101). Unlike the Nazis and the Western philosophers before them, the Jihadists do not want to kill God—they do not want to see him dead—, but rather seek to appropriate him by killing its legitimate witnesses: “Stemming from a metaphysical origin, the Jihadists’ hatred of the Jewish state is a hatred of the teachings of Judaism that undermine their project of the usurpation and appropriation of God” (p. 216).

The same frame of analysis is applied again to the anti-Zionists, including anti-Zionist Jews. According to the *Midrash*, “the gate of heaven is in Jerusalem” (*Midrash on Psalms* 4:91:7). Thus, “Jerusalem is not only the capital of Israel—it is the *Umbilicus Urbis*, the center of the world” (pp. 203–204). Moreover, on this account, “Jerusalem lays claim to the Jews” (p. 204). So, Jews have their rightful place in Israel, the center of the world. This being said, the “global domination that the anti-Semite fears [...] is neither political nor financial; rather, it is the all-encompassing ethical demand that emanates from Mount Sinai through the Jews” (p. 196). Why? Because the anti-Semite wants to escape the ethical responsibility that is entailed by that demand. In fact, “the religious and secular anti-Zionists, from rabid Jihadists to radical liberals, share a self-righteous indignation over the very existence of the Jewish state precisely because they themselves would be the moral measure of humanity” (p. 199). Denying that Israel is essentially and inherently Jewish territory is to free oneself of the divine commandments: “If the advent of the State of Israel has no metaphysical meaning—if the Land of Israel is not the Holy Land—then the revelation at Mount Sinai has no meaning, the Torah has no meaning, and the Jewish people have no meaning, which is the contention of the anti-Zionists. If that is the case, however, then the absolute nature of the prohibition against murder has no meaning” (p. 201).

² Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, 154.

This line of reasoning is applied once more to the Jew who rejects or even only disregards some of the tenets of Judaism. The Jew who turns away from the Judaic tradition is seen as a “Jew-hater” and as an “anti-Semitic Jew”: “Trading the Torah for the promise of a seat at the table of an anti-Semitic society, the Jew-hating Jew buys into a promise as deadly and deceptive as the temptation of the serpent: you will be like God, or at least like those of us who would be as God” (p. 225). Again, as “Jew-hating Jews, Jewish anti-Semites are Torah- and Talmud-hating Jews” (p. 226). On this view, the so-called “enlightened Jews,” such as Spinoza, or the “Jews of accommodation,” such as Hermann Cohen, who “accommodate” themselves to the Western philosophical system, to Western rationality, are considered anti-Semites who fell for the delusion of the Greco-Roman rationalist project. The Jews who philosophize and who engage in free inquiry are seen as a threat to divine revelation, of which the Jews are supposed to be the most ancient witnesses and guardians. The “marriage of philosophy and Judaism” or more precisely, in Cohen’s case, the “marriage of Kantian philosophy and Judaism” (p. 234), goes against the true spirit of Judaism and leads to the complete abandonment of Judaism, as was the case with anti-Semitic Jews like Karl Marx, Otto Weininger, and Sigmund Freud (pp. 235–241).

For Patterson, such philosophers as Spinoza, Cohen, Marx, etc., are not representatives of “Jewish thought,” because what characterizes Jewish thought—on his interpretation of it—is an understanding of God and the world grounded in the holy tongue and in the texts of the sacred Judaic tradition: the Torah, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah, etc. In an earlier book, the author cites a Midrash, where it is said that a man should never teach his son the wisdom of the Greeks (*Menachot* 99b). He conceives Western philosophy—from Aristotle to Heidegger—as “the Other Side,”³ i.e. as a rationalistic speculative tradition radically different from the Jewish one, which, in contrast, is historically rooted in Jerusalem: “Whereas the Greek ontological thought at the root of Western thinking gazes upon the cosmos in search of a principle, Jewish thought attends to the silence and hears a voice. For the former, the world reflects something from within the world; for the latter, the world is a revelation of something from beyond the world.”⁴ Even the theological aspects of Western thought are rejected as antithetical to Judaic thought; the “gods of the philosophers, who view G-d as a passionless ‘unmoved mover’ (for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1071b–1072b), identify him with nature (for example, Spinoza, *Ethics*, Preface to Part IV), or reduce him to a concept (for example, Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A818/B846)—all are false gods,

3 Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, 213.

4 *Ibid.*, 17.

nothing more than 'supreme beings' at the height of all being, gods that inevitably either die or become superfluous."⁵ The two traditions are here portrayed as completely antithetical, thus incompatible, and, in the clash of worldviews, the Judaic one ought to prevail.

Now, the author claims to be approaching these questions with a "new method." The book does not contain any straightforward discussion of what this novel method consists in and of what justifies it. But the reader may retrospectively glean that it amounts to taking an exclusively Judaic point of view on the matter, i.e., of assuming the truth of the main dogma of Judaism. This implies assuming the existence of God and more precisely the God of Judaism, in assuming the existence of the soul, the truth of the revelation to the prophets of Judaism, the truth of the Jewish holy scriptures (the Torah, Talmud, Midrash, etc.), the truth of the claim that the Jews are the chosen people, the truth of the narrative of the Jews' mission, that they are chosen for the absolute ethical responsibility, the truth of the claim that Israel is the land of the chosen people and that the Jews have a special connection to God through this holy land, that Hebrew is the holy tongue, that we all descend from Adam, etc. These all form a set of premises presumed to be true throughout the book. This being said, a chapter or section on the new method and its justification would have been helpful, especially given that the book's entire argumentation relies on it and, thus, stands or falls with it. Since the set of premises on which the author relies begs the question to all those who do not share in the Theistic Judaic set of premises, the very novelty of the book lies in proposing an explanation on the grounds of a *petitio principii*. And the author does nothing to support these premises. Of course, doing so would be rationalistic, thus essentially "anti-Semitic." The "metaphysical explanation" of the origins of anti-Semitism is therefore "metaphysical" in the very sense of what the positivists understood by that term, i.e. in the sense of *unverifiable*. So the explanation advanced in this book appears to be no more successful than the other hypotheses on the market, however imperfect these may be. In fact, they all have the advantage over the so-called metaphysical explanation of not making the unverifiable set of assumptions that it makes.

One of these other hypotheses, to which the author's thesis is opposed, is that of the acclaimed Jewish historian of ideas Zeev Sternhell, according to whom the anti-Semitism of the twentieth century has its roots, not in the Western rationalist project, but rather in the anti-rationalist (anti-Enlightenment or counter-Enlightenment or *Gegen-Aufklärung*) movement, especially in such

5 Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, 57–58.

anti-rationalists as Johann Herder and Edmund Burke. Herder and Burke in turn influenced other irrationalists such as Giambattista Vico, Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Joseph de Maistre, Thomas Carlyle, and later Benedetto Croce, Oswald Spengler, and Maurice Barrès. For Sternhell, “Herder and Burke went to war against the rationalist civilization”⁶; “Herder’s antirationalism was a way for him to attack philosophy in itself”⁷; “Burke’s *Réflexions sur la Révolution de France*, as well as de Maistre’s *Considérations sur la France*, are conceived by their authors [...] as war machines directed against the ideas of the *philosophes*”⁸ Vico believed that “reason only withered our soul;”⁹ and for Barrès “at the origin of the evil that corrodes the society of his time, is rationalism.”¹⁰ In general, “for the enemies of the Enlightenment, decadence is inevitable in a world that adopts rationalism as principle of behavior.”¹¹ Anti-Enlightenment thinkers were typically defending tradition, nation, and religion, against the threat of philosophy, prejudices against the threat of reason. Sternhell warned that “the temptation is great to seek the roots of evil in the intellectual origins of the modern world.”¹² But, as Sternhell says, “man is able to go forward, provided that he appeals to reason.”¹³ Contrary to Patterson, for Sternhell the culprit is rather “the irruption of the irrational.”¹⁴ Oddly enough, Patterson does not even mention Sternhell’s position—against which he should have at least tried to argue—in spite of the fact that the latter’s book was first published in 2006 (2009 for the English translation).

Frédéric Tremblay

Saint-Petersburg State University, Saint-Petersburg, Russia

6 Zeev Sternhell, *Les anti-Lumières: Une tradition du XVIII^e siècle à la guerre froide, édition revue et augmentée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 57.

7 *Ibid.*, 291.

8 *Ibid.*, 769.

9 *Ibid.*, 183.

10 *Ibid.*, 574.

11 *Ibid.*, 41.

12 *Ibid.*, 761.

13 *Ibid.*, 796.

14 *Ibid.*, 796.