

Antisemitism/ Antijudaism (Philosophy of Religion)

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The vagueness of the term antisemitism – especially with regard to its origins – renders it controversial. It was first introduced and deployed in 1879 as the programmatic self-designation of a political-social movement – the “Anti-Semitic league” (“Antisemitenliga”) – whose goal was to combat Judaism. Currently, the term is mostly used colloquially either as a noun (antisemitism, antisemites) or as an attribute (antisemitic). It serves its purpose as a tried and tested term that remains discursively effective and whose role is to identify expressions, attitudes, and practices that are rooted in an antisemitic attitude or that can be interpreted as antisemitic. It is, however, disputed whether and to what extent religiously motivated anti-judaism, national anti-Zionism, and politically motivated hostility toward Israel can all be subsumed equally under, and thought about by means of, this colloquially used “container-term” (Containerbegriff).

Table of Contents

[1. The Potential of a Container-term \(*Containerbegriff*\)](#)

[2. Objections to Research on Antisemitism](#)

[3. Factual and Historical Distinctions](#)

[4. Open Horizons of Problems, Emerging Discourses, Critical Questions, and Urgent Tasks](#)

[Recommended Literature](#)

[Citations](#)

[Citation Style](#)

[Metadata](#)

Editorial Note

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1. The Potential of a Container-term (*Containerbegriff*)

Antisemitism serves as a blanket term (*Mantelbegriff*) for all “tendencies, resentments, attitudes, and behaviors”^[1] that, irrespective of their religious, national, social, economic, or race-based motivations,^[2] are directed against persons whose ethnic-religious identity is explicitly tied to the religious and cultic community (*Kultusgemeinschaft*) of the Jews and/or to the state of Israel.^[3]

More specifically, the concept of *antisemitism* encompasses:

- a. the collection of hostile attitudes toward, and defamatory statements against, persons and groups of persons who, on the basis of a specific lineage and origin, narratives and identity markers, specific cultural traditions, and a unique geographic-territorial location, view themselves as members of the Jewish people or the state of Israel, as well as
- b. all aggressive attitudes and malicious statements against habitual patterns, culturally specific expressions, and political activities that trace back directly to the concepts of identity, and the ideals of self-determination, of Jewish as well as Israeli persons, and finally
- c. all constructions and uses of clichés, irrespective of whether these clichés derive from Jewish and Israeli-Israelite identity constructs (*Identitätsbildern*) or from unfounded, derogatory images and false claims coming from others.

With that said, it must be kept in mind that concepts of self-determination and determinations imposed by others (*Fremdbestimmungen*), ideas of identity, and labels ascribed by others (*Fremdzuschreibungen*) are intertwined and reciprocally determine each other:

One of the most pertinent yet perfidious examples of this reciprocal determination is found in the reformulation and reformatting of the concept of the *chosen (and desert wandering) people of God* (cf. Gen 15; Ex 19:3–6; Dtn 7:6; Jer 7:23) that Judaism initially ascribed to itself. First reinterpreted within early Christianity (Hebr 3; Hebr 11), it later received a new Augustinian ^{GND} formulation that was applied to the Christian church (*as civitas peregrina*) and subsequently deployed against Judaism. From the early middle ages onwards, this start to occur in increasingly cynical ways. It is encountered clearly in the construction of popular legends, where it is deployed to outline and depict the distorted image of the restless Jew condemned to wandering (connected, among other things, with an intentional misinterpretation of Gen 4:11f.). Since the 17th-18th centuries, it is present most notably in the stereotype of the *eternal Jew Ahasver*, who now functions as a symbol for a stray people who have been predestined for rejection in God's plan of election and condemnation but who nevertheless aspire to world domination.^[4] This model history of conceptual shifts in meaning – from a central concept in Jewish self-understanding to a destructive and defaming image externally ascribed to the Jewish people – is in fact symptomatic. It is still today important to maintain the insight that the (falsely disguised as naïve because traditional or even as innocent) maliciously ironic misuse of identity markers – such as the fundamental Jewish motif of election – could ultimately have contributed disastrously to the emergence of all kinds of pogroms.

2. Objections to Research on Antisemitism

The scientifically legitimate and interdisciplinary research into antisemitism – spurred on by numerous studies starting in the 1920s but only adequately institutionalized in the 1980s – attempts to do justice to both the complex findings of phenomena and the challenges of a complicated conceptual indifference. In particular, attempts have been made to counter the dominance of antisemitism as an umbrella-concept by means of historical and systematic distinctions and to incorporate gradually the methodological approaches found in sociology, religious studies, literary and media theory, and individual and socio-psychology.^[5]

As for the summary foundational term (*Grundbegriff*) *antisemitism*, what is seen as particularly problematic is that its origin remains associated with highly contested historical facts. After all, the journalist Wilhelm Marr ^{GND} conceived the term in 1879 and proposed it as a concept for a movement that, by means of racist thinkers and, sought both to intensify the prevailing conventional, religiously-based racism arguments (cf. art. Racism [Systematic Theology] and art. Racism [Christian Ethics]) against Judaism at the time and, ultimately, to promote a nationalistic-ethnically infused and realpolitik fight against Judaism.

The legitimate objections to the procedure of uncritically deploying this 19th century antisemitic conceptual term as an integral definition (*Definitionsbegriff*), as well as the reliable findings of differentiated antisemitic research, have led to the practice of reacting intensively to specific historical phases in the history of anti-Jewish statements and riots with a more precise terminology.

3. Factual and Historical Distinctions

If the evaluative assessment and terminological specification also take into account the respective historical and social circumstances as well as the motives and underlying moods of those involved, then the following distinctions emerge:

- a. The concept of **“anti-Judaism”** encompasses all resentments and activities that ultimately are connected to the problem of the identity of a religious movement (*Glaubensbewegung*) that emerged out of Judaism: that is, the unique position of a new religious faction that sought to define itself in contrast to its mother-religion, that identified the crucified man Jesus as the Messiah who had been revealed to its adherents as their Christ. This unique situation gave rise not only to theological debates. It also increasingly encouraged this new religious movement to demonstrate its religious and societal-political significance and to secure it in an almost exclusive way, even by means of polemics – thus, both Abbot Hieronymus of Bethlehem ^{GND} and bishop John Chrysostom of Antioch ^{GND} cultivated in the fourth century the belief in the stubborn Jews as the murderers of God. Power interests began to play an increasing role, something exhibited clearly in the liaison between worldly and spiritual power that resulted in the establishment of Christianity in 380 CE as the official state religion of the Roman empire. This development proved to be momentous: acts of violence against Jewish minorities and the rapid dissemination of legends (with the primary accusations being those of *desecrating the host* and *ritual murder*) were common in the first centuries of the second millennia. Well-known and repulsive examples in this respect include Martin Luther’s ^{GND} statements – colored by proselytizing failures – about the “Jews and their lies” and the (polemical, literary, and often distorted as “sweet Jew”-tale) history of Joseph Oppenheimer ^{GND} who was wrongfully executed in 1738 on the charges of desecrating the protestant religion, abuse of underage Christians, and high treason.^[6] These examples illustrate the seamless transition from a religiously motivated anti-Judaism to a secularized antisemitism.
- b. The term **political antisemitism**,^[7] which focuses on a program imbued with conspiracies and fueled by ethnic (*völkisch*)-nationalistic attitudes and romantic national myths, refers to that phase in the above-noted transition in which nationalistic and racist arguments coming. ^[8] Within a matter of decades in the 19th century, a self-consciously antisemitic stance established itself in Germany. Just like the silent masses, its spokespersons made use of several prejudices, clichés, and slogans of various intellectual origins, some of which were intertwined.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect are the following slogans:

1. Refusing in every way to integrate, Jews remain aliens in all European states,
2. such a nation within a nation is intolerable, particular because
3. the “feeling of the German people” (*“germanische Volksgefühl”*) will always be incompatible with the foreign element of the Jewish spirit (*Geist*),
4. in this respect and in any case, it is already possible to recognize all members of that completely different race (cf. art. Racism [Systematic Theology] and art. Racism [Christian Ethics]) on the basis of clear (inferior) characteristics,
5. and Judaism is already working on a Zionist world-conspiracy (*Weltverschwörung*) to take over power that must be resisted at all costs if it is not to succeed.^[9]

N. B.: Situating political antisemitism in relation to the work of Theodor Herzl ^{GND} remains a problematic enterprise. A Austro-Hungarian lawyer, journalist, and writer who belonged to the class of assimilated Jews, Herzl compiled his arguments against antisemitic polemics in his 1896 study *The Jewish State* and

also pioneered the concept of political Zionism. The leitmotif of the latter was that the Jews formed a nation and, consequently, that a Jewish State had to be founded.

- c. **Modern antisemitism** summarizes the discriminatory, exclusionary, and destructive thoughts and actions that proved to be terribly powerful during the Third Reich.^[10] Although it is hardly possible to measure the historical margins of this probably most radical form of anti-Semitism and to determine the historical moments of transition from an anti-Semitism based on racist and social Darwinist arguments to a state-ordered and ideologically orchestrated hostility towards Jews, the dates of the fully planned extermination of the Jews and the facts of the organized genocide have long since illustrated this phase of anti-Semitism in a relevant way. However, it should be noted that it did not begin with the so-called *Reichskristallnacht*. Nor did it conclude with the military end of the Holocaust and the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.
- d. Without a doubt, the images from the concentration and extermination camps have etched themselves into the cultural memory (*das kulturelle Gedächtnis*), albeit with different outcomes. They provoke, on the one hand, a culture of shame that is overburdened with the rhetoric of dismay and, on the other hand, a culture that denies both guilt and the facts. This dual phenomenon has been labeled **secondary antisemitism**. It also indicates that, in the center of society, there is an **Antisemitism 2.0** that clings to resentments, bogymen, stereotypes, and ideologically-loaded narratives.
- e. As provisional indications of a, so to speak, (**new / tertiary / postmodern / pop cultural**) **Antisemitism 3.0**, it is possible to point to practices, conventions, and interpretations that disseminate digitally and that are amplified via algorithms in the so-called *social media*. They are also formatted, staged, and presented as topics in contemporary media platforms where they function more so for the entertainment of consumers than as opportunities for critical debate.^[11]
- f. Also playing a considerable role here is the increasing **hostility toward Israel** (*Israelfeindlichkeit*) that is often purportedly related to, and inspired by, actual political events. This hostility either can be viewed as a civil duty in light of ongoing diplomatic and military conflicts in the Near East or it can be interpreted as a latent form of antisemitism, something suggested by headlines such as *Israel and its Pugnacity in the Near East*. Occasionally it is argued that religious and racist arguments play no role in the so-called **left-wing antisemitism**.^[12] Resentments toward Judaism or Jewish people are usually formulated in this context as **antizionism** (*Antizionismus*) and presented within the framework of a soviet-communistic infused critique of imperialism and capitalism. In this sense, this critique is somewhat similar to the critique of money-based power (*Geldmachtkritik*) in the Middle Ages and the critique of capitalism promoted by national-political antisemitism and National Socialism.^[13]
- g. A unique case of hostility toward Israel is the hostility shown toward Jews on the part of Muslims, increasingly but incorrectly identified as **Islamic** or **Islamist antisemitism**. Whoever dares to research this issue will have to examine closely the debates in theology and religious studies regarding different forms of monotheism and also take into consideration a number of other factors, including:
1. the ongoing migratory history of Judaism and the Jewish people,
 2. the Zionist aspirations in the 19th century to establish a Jewish state in what was at the time the Ottoman region of Palestine,
 3. the intentions of Great Britain, against the backdrop of its League of Nations mandate for Palestine from 1920-1948, to support the founding of an Israeli state in order to secure a powerful ally in the Arabic region,
 4. the fact that the Arabic national movement in the 1940s maintained close relations with the German national socialists and the Italian fascists. Good arguments are therefore available to support the thesis that stereotypes about, and resentments toward, Jews in the Arabic world were an import from Europe.^[14]

4. Open Horizons of Problems, Emerging Discourses, Critical Questions, and Urgent Tasks

The horizon of problems that the above distinctions and overall assessment open up is considerable. Further research in this area requires thinking carefully about how to position oneself as well as an openness to interreligious-intercultural discourses – for instance, discourses that pertain to the multilayered work on the search for truth in religion, the theologically informed question concerning absoluteness (*Absolutheitsfrage*) in religion, and the meaning, significance, and validity of culturally constructed narratives of identity. Likewise, it will be necessary to take into account the connection between how conceptions of an enemy are constructed (*Feindbildkonstruktionen*), religiously as well as culturally inflected understandings of sense and nonsense, basal phobias, social situations, and the various processes that lead to group formation and group concepts. Particular relevant in this regard is Kimberlé Crenshaw's GND concept of intersectionality^[15] that seeks both to respond to the established phenomenon of multi-layered discrimination (*Mehrfachdiskriminierung*) and to grasp reflectively the cooperation and overlapping of multiple mechanisms that oppress and discredit. Finally, in terms of social and education policy, new and expanded educational scenarios are required so that identity markers can be recognized, understood, and, if necessary, corrected.

Recommended Literature

For recommended literature, see the German version of this article.

Citations

- ¹ Benz, Wolfgang, Antisemitismus. Präsenz und Tradition eines Ressentiments, Frankfurt ³2020, 21, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ² Cf. Benz, Antisemitismus, 21.
- ³ Cf. also the definition of antisemitism offered by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), 26.05.2016 (<https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus>), retrieved on 29.08.2024; See also Becker, Matthias J., Antisemitism in Reader Comments. Analogies for Reckoning with the Past, Wiesbaden 2021, 139–152; Porat, Dina, Definitionen des Antisemitismus, in: Grimm, Marc/Kahmann, Bodo (Eds.), Antisemitismus im 21. Jahrhundert. Virulenz einer alten Feindschaft in Zeiten von Islamismus und Terror, München 2018, 27–49.
- ⁴ Cf. Benz, Wolfgang, Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion. Die Legende von der jüdischen Weltverschwörung, München ³2017, 19–30.
- ⁵ Cf. Königseder, Angelika, Art. Antisemitismusforschung, in: Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart 3 (2022), 16–21.
- ⁶ Cf. WA 53; 530.
- ⁷ Cf. Pulzer, Peter, Die Entstehung des politischen Antisemitismus in Deutschland und Österreich 1867–1914, Göttingen 2004.
- ⁸ Cf. Hampe, Arnold, Art. Nationalismus, in: Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart 3 (2022), 220–223.
- ⁹ Cf. Benz, Antisemitismus, 49–65.
- ¹⁰ The more precise definition as “modern” remains questionable, of course, but it serves as a warning in view of the mechanized killing industry of the Germans.

- ¹¹ Cf. Hübscher, Monika/Mehring, Sabine von (Eds.), Antisemitismus in den Sozialen Medien, Opladen 2024; Brinkmann, Frank Thomas/Krüger, Malte (Eds.), Unterhaltsamer Antisemitismus?! Kritische Perspektiven auf asoziale Phänomene (nicht nur) des 21. Jahrhunderts, Wiesbaden 2025.
- ¹² Cf. Hanloser, Gerhard (Ed.), Linker Antisemitismus?, Wien 2020.
- ¹³ Cf. Kloke, Martin, Israel und die deutsche Linke. Zur Geschichte eines schwierigen Verhältnisses, Frankfurt 1994.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Benz, Antisemitismus, 203–216; Küntzel, Matthias, Die Nazis und der Nahe Osten. Wie der islamische Antisemitismus entstand, Leipzig 2019.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Biele Mefebeu, Astrid et al. (Eds.), Handbuch Intersektionalitätsforschung, Wiesbaden 2022.

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