

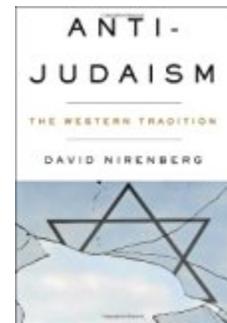


David Nirenberg. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. 610 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-05824-6.

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The Metaphysics of Anti-Judaism

David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* makes a unique contribution to an understanding of how the tradition of anti-Semitism has shaped the history of ideas in the West. The book addresses several questions: Why did so many diverse cultures think about Judaism? How did thinking about Judaism help them to make sense of their world? How does this history of thinking about Judaism affect the future of the Jewish people? "The book is intended above all," Nirenberg states his primary objective, "to suggest some of the important ways in which 'Jewish questions' have shaped the history of thought" (p. 2). As he surveys various periods of history, from ancient times to the modern period, Nirenberg's goal "is to demonstrate how different people put old ideas about Judaism to new kinds of work in thinking about their world; to show how this work engaged the past and transformed it; and to ask how that work reshaped the possibilities for thought in the future" (p. 5). Drawing on his vast reservoir of learning, Nirenberg thoroughly achieves his goal.

In his first chapter he shows how the foundations of anti-Judaic thinking were laid in Greek Alexandria. That Hellenistic mode of thought, he explains in the second chapter, would influence the Pauline struggle for control of the scriptural inheritance in the first centuries of Christianity. Here a body/spirit duality was established in early Christianity that was familiar to Hellenistic thought but alien to Hebraic thought. With the advent of the church fathers, says Nirenberg, "every interpretation of scripture could be (and was) evaluated against

a negative index of Jewish carnality and spiritual blindness" (p. 104). By the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the official religion of Rome, this theological exclusion of the Jews became a political exclusion of the Jews.

Nirenberg's assessment of the anti-Judaism that shaped Islamic thinking in chapter 4 is especially interesting. In Islam, he writes, "Israel, serves both as the foundation of God's communication with humanity and as the fundamental example of humanity's resistance to that communication" (p. 142). Recognizing the foundational significance of the Jews, the Muslims appropriate that foundation by declaring that the Jews had falsified the scriptures; because the Jews falsified the word, they are stigmatized. Throughout Islamic history, notes Nirenberg, one can find "quotes saturated with certainty about the Jews' ontological status as figures of hypocrisy" (p. 178).

With the coming of the Middle Ages, the theological stigmatization of the Jews in Christian Europe had implications for the political power struggles that unfolded among the medieval sovereigns. Nirenberg argues that the infamous lies and libels about the Jews that arose in the Middle Ages were as much the result of these power struggles as they were the outcome of religious superstition and hatred. "Throughout the Middle Ages," says Nirenberg, "princes' oppression of their Jews led directly to their celebration" when they were in power (p. 208). On the other hand, their enemies would attack them for

their “Jewish traits” (p. 215). Thus “Jewishness” came to be a feature attached not only to the Jews. In his examination of the extinction of Spain’s Jews and the birth of its Inquisition, then, Nirenberg asks, “Why is it that the fear of Judaizing reached a new peak in western Europe at precisely the moment when Jews had virtually disappeared from it?” (p. 218). He shows that “Judaizing” gained new social and political power precisely when the Jews disappeared, because once “Jewishness” was rendered invisible, it became more ominous and more threatening.

With the arrival of the Reformation, as Nirenberg shows in chapter 7, Martin Luther was able to make political use of the tactic of Judaizing the Roman Church; not surprisingly, Luther’s enemies also Judaized him. The key to this interaction between Luther and the church, between Luther and his enemies, and above all between Luther and the Jews is his appropriation of the scriptural word and therefore his understanding of the importance of language. “Luther’s reconceptualization of the ways in which language mediates between God and creation,” Nirenberg maintains, “was achieved by thinking with, about, and against Jews and Judaism” (p. 267). And his thinking vis-à-vis the Jews shaped his entire worldview.

Language was also a central concern for Shakespeare, Nirenberg argues in his assessment of *The Merchant of Venice*. For Shakespeare the “Jewish question” was: “How much liberty can the language of theatre be allowed?” (p. 292). As it unfolds in the play, the language under consideration is the language of the oath, where “the Christian triumph over Judaism consists in knowing not how to keep the oath and its symbolic forms but when, in the interests of love, to let them go” (p. 294). Nirenberg explains very well how the age-old dichotomy between the letter and the spirit, the Jew and the Christian, plays out here. It would also play out with the coming of the Enlightenment and modern thought. “Neither the Enlightenment nor modernity overthrew the Christian theologies of Judaism,” Nirenberg demonstrates; “Instead they translated them into new terms” (p. 301).

A chief culprit in the transition to modernity is Baruch/Benedict Spinoza. Here Nirenberg’s contribution lies in exposing Spinoza as a thinker who may have been

a Jew but who was not a Jewish thinker: “Spinoza translated Christian ideas about Jewish error and irrationality into secular terms, assigning to Jews and Judaism a role as enemy of reason that was very similar to the role of enemy of revelation assigned them by Christian theology” (p. 338). In a similar fashion, “the philosophes adopted and transformed Christianity’s founding enmity, the enmity of Judaism toward the spirit” (p. 357). If the French Revolution of 1789 was the political outcome of the French Enlightenment, Nirenberg demonstrates, it was a revolt against Judaism. Here, too, he offers an original insight into the anti-Judaism that has shaped not only Western history but also Western thought.

There was a parallel development in the German Enlightenment, as Nirenberg shows in chapter 12. The most prominent thinker of eighteenth-century Germany was, of course, Immanuel Kant, whose “theories about how human reason related to the material world depended on the same basic hierarchical distinctions—‘between spirit and matter, soul and body, faith and intellect, freedom and necessity’—that we encountered in Christianity” (p. 394). Like Luther, Kant believed that “once the cognitive revolution was accomplished,” the Jews would convert and disappear (p. 395); later “Schopenhauer thought of these struggles within Idealism as part of a cosmological battle with Judaism” (p. 412). Hegel provides a good example of Schopenhauer’s point, as Nirenberg points out: “When Hegel, for example, wanted to provide an example of an incorrect relation to things and property, he turned to the Jews. Their ‘mind,’ he explains, ‘is completely held fast to one side’ by legalism and contract [as in the case of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*]. In ‘this firm bond there is no freedom,’ and virtually no humanity” (p. 452).

Nirenberg accomplishes very well his task of explaining how and why ideas about Jews and Judaism have had such a huge impact on the Western view of the state of the world. If, as he says, his goal was “to encourage reflection about our ‘projective behavior,’ that is, about the ways in which our deployment of concepts into and onto the world might generate ‘pathological’ fantasies of Judaism” (p. 468), he has been quite successful in achieving it.

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