Chapter 4

Anti-Semitism as a Civil Religion: Progressive Paradigms in the Anti-Semitic Construction of German National Identity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter portrays the 19th century political ideology of anti-Semitism as a form of civil religion that promoted the ideation of a German national society. In contrast to its interpretation as a right-wing reactionary protest against modernity, antisemitism, it will be argued, adapted the conceptualization of collective identity to the premises of a progressive worldview, defining German society in terms of the modern paradigms of nationalism, scientism and anti-transcendentalism. Evidence for this assertion will be elicited from texts by German anti-Semitic writers and analyzed with the aid of contemporary theories and thinkers.

INTRODUCTION

In his treatise on The Social Contract, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau considers incongruence between social and governmental structures a major reason for political decline. He therefore propounds the model of civil religion as an instrument to create solidarity and social unity among the citizens of a state (Rousseau, 1958).
Consistent with this concept, the 19th century political ideology of anti-Semitism, it is argued here, promoted an idea of German national identity, as it pushed for the social integration of the German nation. As early as 1880, when the concept of anti-Semitism had just evolved, German historian Theodor Mommsen labeled it the “mis-formation of national awareness” (Misgeburt des nationalen Gefühls) (Mommsen, 1881: 4). Later historical and social research corroborates the finding that anti-Semitism played a role in the formation of German national identity. According to Reinhard Rürup, at least in part, anti-Semitism constituted an “effort to solidify the sense of national identity … the Jew was turned into a counter-image against which the nation—transcending tribal, class, and religious differences—could form its identity” (Rürup, 1975: 107-108, my translation). Klaus Holz similarly argues that:

Typically, the construction of antisemitic notions regarding the Jews went hand in hand with the construction of a we-group framed in the modern sense of a “people” or nation.” … Nationalism and anti-Semitism—the image of the self and the image of the other—merge … into a worldview. … In this semantic, the demarcation of the image of the Jew is constitutive of the construction of the we-group. (Holz, 2001: 13, 17, my translation)

Anti-Semitism, therefore, complemented aspirations for the political construction of a German nation state with the ambition to conceptualize German national society. Struggling for the emancipation of Germans from perceived foreign and especially Jewish domination, anti-Semites, as will be shown here, saw themselves as fighters for national liberation and self-determination. They applied the idea of civil religion, in the way that they promoted solidarity among members of a politically sovereign nation in the making. In contrast to its interpretation as a right-wing reactionary protest against modernity, anti-Semitism, it will be argued, adapted the conceptualization of collective identity to the premises of a progressive worldview, defining German society based on the modern paradigms of nationalism, scientism and anti-transcendentalism.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. The first one outlines the concept of anti-Semitism as used herein. The second section elaborates the concepts of religion and civil religion, which will later be applied in the analysis of anti-Semitism, in regard to their socially formative aspects. The third section discusses the phenomenon of nationalism and the evolution of its German appropriation as the context in which the civil religion of anti-Semitism developed. The fourth section constitutes the heart of this chapter. Analyzing writings by Eugen Dühring, Paul de Lagarde, and Wilhelm Marr – three key figures in Germany’s nineteenth-century antisemitic movement, it demonstrates that in conceptualizing German national identity, anti-
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