INTERNATIONAL ANALYSIS

'Judaeo-Christian civilisation': Nethanyahu's historical lie on French television

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Speaking on France's LCI news channel last week, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu waved the banner of defending 'Judaeo-Christian civilisation' as he sought to justify his crusade against the Palestinian people. In this analysis, Mediapart co-founder Edwy Plenel deconstructs an historical falsehood that ignores the long history of Christian anti-Semitism.

"Our victory is your victory! It's the victory of Judaeo-Christian civilisation against barbarism. It's France's victory!" That was the essence of Benjamin Netanyahu's message on Thursday May 30th, in the platform given to him by France's leading television group, TF1, on its news channel LCI.

Despite facing a demand for an arrest warrant from the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court over war crimes and crimes against humanity, Israel's prime minister was able, with little difficulty, to deliver a propaganda speech on French television (*read the analysis here, in French, by international lawyer Johann Soufi on X*).

His explicit aim was not merely to win the support of the French people for his vengeful war against Gaza but to drag our country into a war of civilisations, even within our own borders. For Netanyahu was quick to equate the threat that a Palestinian state would supposedly lead to with that allegedly posed by France's suburbs, where many people of immigrant origins live.

This media episode clearly does little to enhance France's reputation. At least, not the official France and its dominant media and current leadership, whose evident complacency towards the extremist Israeli regime stands in stark contrast to the tireless mobilisation of young people in solidarity with the people of Gaza. The day before this television interview, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* used black strips to highlight the censorship imposed on it by a government whose prime minister has granted no interviews to an Israeli media outlet since the massacres of October 7th 2023, fearing more assertive and critical questioning from journalists.

Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem, April 17th 2024. © Photo Kira Hofmann / dpa / ZUMA / REA

In the very same week, Emmanuel Macron refused to recognise the state of Palestine, while the president of the National Assembly reaffirmed her "unconditional" support for the state of Israel by severely sanctioning a Member of Parliament from the radical-left La France Insoumise who had brandished a Palestinian flag in the chamber. In contrast, Les Républicains-affiliated MP Meyer Habib faced no such reproach for his commitment to Israeli propaganda, boasting of having held a "working meeting" with Netanyahu in Jerusalem in preparation for his LCI interview. Finally, in a dreadful interview with *Le Figaro* newspaper, former president Nicolas Sarkozy also invoked Europe's "Judaeo-Christian roots" in a tirade against "decolonialism" and "Islamo-leftism".

Jules Isaac and the Christian roots of anti-Semitism

This "Judaeo-Christian" argument is the refrain of those who adhere to the notion of a clash of civilisations, an idea that sees Israel as Europe's advanced bastion against the Muslim world, a kind of citadel on the front line. Yet this is a historical falsehood, a myth invented to justify and provoke an endless war, one driven by Islamophobic racism, whose identity-based - and religious - motivations shatter the democratic requirement for equality of rights.

It is also a grim reversal: after nearly two millennia of European persecutions, fuelled by Christian anti-Judaism, Jews - whether in Israel or in the diaspora - are thus being co-opted as an alibi, justification and shield for an anti-Muslim (and anti-Arab) crusade.

So we will counter Netanyahu, Sarkozy and their ilk with Jules Isaac (1877-1963), a figure as forgotten today as he was pivotal post-war in fostering better Judaeo-Christian relations. In educational terms he is forever associated with the well-known Malet-Isaac history textbook of which he was the principal author. "Do I then have to apologise for continuing to strive to uncover and, if possible, eradicate the Christian roots of anti-Semitism? No, for they are, in my opinion, the deepest," he wrote. These words begin his 1962 work '*L'Enseignement de Mépris*' ('The Teaching of Contempt'), published a year before his death, following '*Jésus et Israël*' (1948) and '*Genèse de l'antisémitisme*' (1956).

As a young man he had fought the injustice of anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus affair, alongside Charles Péguy; later he became a teacher of history and was appointed inspector general of public education in 1936. A victim of Jewish persecution from 1940 after France was defeated by Nazi Germany, Jules Isaac dedicated the last twenty years of his life to "dissecting, exposing and combating the Christian roots of anti-Semitism", as his biographer André Kaspi put it, while also, in 1948, founding the Jewish-Christian association Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France. That same year he published '*Jésus et Israël*', a work that aimed to "confront the Christian world with its heavy responsibilities". The book was dedicated to his wife and daughter, both murdered in Auschwitz, who in his words were "killed by Hitler's Nazis, killed simply because their name was Isaac".

> ***The exterminatory racism of our era, even if it is in essence anti-Christian, developed on Christian soil and has carefully inherited the very dubious legacy of Christianity.***

Jules Isaac, December 1959

Through his books and lectures, and even in Rome with Pope John XXIII before the Second Vatican Council, Jules Isaac tirelessly advocated an awareness of the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, which was the European breeding ground for the Nazi crime. Isaac meticulously traced the origins of how a minor breakaway group within Judaism transformed itself into the institution of the Christian Church that conquered the summits of power. He demonstrated how, in its quest for dominance, Christianity turned against its Jewish origins. From as early as his '*Carnet du lépreux*'

('Leper's notebook' 1941-1943), this work led him to a "conviction that this handed-down tradition, taught for hundreds and hundreds of years by thousands and thousands of voices, was the primary source of anti-Semitism, the powerful and ancient root onto which all other varieties of anti-Semitism – even the worst – have been grafted".

"I have said and I maintain," he declared during a conference in December 1959 at the Sorbonne university in Paris, "that the exterminatory racism of our time, even if it is essentially anti-Christian, developed on Christian soil and carefully inherited the very dubious legacy of Christianity." This legacy is primarily the accusation of deicide, a claim that was formulated as soon as the Church became allied with the state, under the Roman Empire. "For eighteen hundred years, throughout Christendom," Isaac wrote in the preface to the most crucial chapter of his '*Jésus et Israël*', "it has been commonly taught that the Jewish people, entirely responsible for the Crucifixion, committed the unpardonable crime of deicide. There is no more deadly accusation and, indeed, none that has shed more innocent blood."

Far from the soothing legend of a "Judaeo-Christian civilisation", this Christian prejudice, which led to the modern genocide of the Jews of Europe, has paved the way for centuries of anti-Jewish persecution. In 1096 the First Crusade, decreed a year earlier by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, began with pogroms, in particular in Rouen and Metz, as well as in Germany. Jews were murdered, forced to convert and had their possessions seized.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council stepped up the implementation of anti-Jewish policies, notably by imposing distinctive clothing and excluding Jews from public office. In 1269 King Louis IX of France decreed that Jews had to wear the *rouelle*, a small yellow cloth wheel sewn onto their clothing, the ancestor of the yellow star of the Nazi persecutions.

This physical segregation of Jews in the Middle Ages, which went as far as the Venetian invention of the ghetto, began with bans on public appearances on Sundays and during Holy Week and culminated in permanent expulsions that increased in number as Europe's influence expanded. When Christopher Columbus's first transatlantic expedition left Spain on August 3rd 1492, the Jews had already been forced to leave by July 31st on the order of the Catholic Monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand, who had just ended eight centuries of Islam in the West with the fall of Granada.

A gathering in front of TF1 headquarters to protest against Benjamin Netanyahu's interview on its news channel LCI, May 30th 2024. © Photo Luc Auffret / Anadolu via AFP

For the Jews of the continent, this was the final rejection – it was extended to Portugal in 1496 - by a Europe where expulsion had already hit everywhere else (1290 in England, 1306 in France). Throughout this long period of European history the persecution of Jews went hand in hand with the assertion of a hegemonic and homogenous Christian identity, which hunted down otherness and legitimised domination.

The concept of *limpieza de sangre* ('purity of blood') prevailed in the Iberian Peninsula from the 15th century to the 19th century, leading to the tracking down of any Jewish or Moorish ancestry. This took place just as the onset of globalisation, hastened by the conquest of the American continent, obliged Europe to confront the issue of encountering the 'other' and the reality of multiple identities - essentially, of racial mixing.

The annexation of Judaism by a so-called superior Christian civilisation serves as a rationale for the civilisational exclusion of Islam.

When, in 1685, the Code Noir under Louis XIV codified slavery in the Antilles, its first article demanded the expulsion of the "Jews who have established residence there", on the grounds that they were the "sworn enemies of the Christian faith". Finally, the same Napoleon I who reinstated slavery in 1802 after it had been abolished by the Revolution, was also the same person who, by establishing a new Christian monarchy, implicitly revoked the citizenship that Jews had acquired in 1791. They were subjected to special laws that marked them out as different, alarming, as a "nation within the nation" as the emperor put it. This refrain would later be echoed by modern anti-Semites, particularly Édouard Drumont, Charles Maurras and the Action Française movement.

The recent invention of a "Judaeo-Christian civilisation", which asserts a cultural homogeneity that excludes the Muslim component of European history, was spearheaded by one of their contemporaries and predecessors, the French scholar Ernest Renan. Having given scholarly legitimacy to an imaginary distinction between Aryans and Semites inherited from German orientalism, Renan differentiated within the latter group between Jews and Muslims in the context of imperialist colonial expansion and its confrontation with Islam. The annexation of Judaism by a supposedly superior Christian civilisation here serves as an argument for the civilisational exclusion of Islam.

French political scientist Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison has extensively documented Renan's inherent Islamophobia, which accompanied his conviction that Europe was definitively conquering the world, with the West finally taking its revenge on the Muslim Orient. "In terms of human reason, Islamism has been only harmful," wrote Renan in 1883, after having declared at the Collège de France twenty years earlier, on February 21st 1862: "European genius is developing with a greatness beyond compare. Islamism, by contrast, is slowly decomposing in our time, it has come crashing down. At present the necessary condition for the spread of European civilisation is the destruction of the Semitic *par excellence*, the destruction of the theocratic power of Islamism and, as a result, the destruction of Islamism."

We have to be careful here about any anachronistic misunderstandings: the Islamism Renan refers to here has little to do with the totalitarian and terrorist ideologies that today claim to represent Islam, but everything to do with a racist prejudice against the peoples to be dominated, the cultures to be annihilated and the territories to be conquered. However, the present day propagandist discourse of Benjamin Netanyahu invokes the very same imagery, and to serve a similar political aim. "We are part of the European culture… Europe ends in Israel," he said back in 2017, addressing European leaders in a bid to position Israel as an outpost of Judaeo-Christian civilisation.

Academic Toby Greene, a lecturer in the Political Studies department at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, referred to the Israeli prime minister's words in an article in 2020 about the misuse of the term 'Judaeo-Christian' by the far right. He then added the following comment to underline how this ideological weapon stokes the flames of a terrible clash of civilisations, driving humanity towards the abyss, caught in the crossfire: "The radical right claim that Europe's Judeo-Christian values are incompatible with Islam reinforces the parallel claim of Islamists, who seek to persuade Muslims that the west and Islam are inherently in conflict."

In his prefaces to 'The Teaching of Contempt', and then *'L'Antisémitisme a-t-il des racines*

chrétiennes' ('Does Anti-Semitism have roots in Christianity?'), Jules Isaac featured two quotations. One was from his mentor Charles Péguy: "There is something worse than having a perverse soul, that is having a soul that gets accustomed." The other was from the reformist Pope John XXIII with whom he was in dialogue: "There is one vital principle, which is never to distort the truth." In 1955, at the height of the Cold War, faced with the arms race and the atomic age, Isaac wrote to Albert Einstein to propose the establishment of a "public welfare committee for the defence of humanity".

The scientist died before he could respond to the idea. But we, who are still alive, can see how welcome this initiative would be at a time when our humanity is dying before our eyes in Gaza. Just as humanity is dying in every place - Ukraine, Syria, Yemen… - where people's rights and the equality of human beings are being trampled on by the powerful and by governments, by civilisations and religions, and by nations and identities etc who declare themselves to be superior to others.

Edwy Plenel

P.S.

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https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/030624/judaeo-christian-civilisation-nethanyahus-historical-lie-french-television

1. The original French version of this article can be found here.

English version by Michael Streeter

Les articles d'Edwy Plenel sur Mediapart :
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