

Anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism? The politics of recognition

by [Jean Bethke Elshtain](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

When people speak loosely of anti-Semitism, do they have in mind a religiously derived separation from Judaism on the part of Christians historically, or a pernicious racist theory? Twentieth-century political theorist Hannah Arendt argued that these are two distinct theories. Anti-Semitism is a modern racist theory that promotes the view that the Jewish people are what the National Socialists in Germany called “subhuman.” The Nazis drew on all sorts of “scientific data” to back this up, and many top scholars in Germany signed on in this effort.

Anti-Judaism, by contrast, means “against” or “rivaling” in the Latin sense of “anti.” The anti-imperialist, for example, scorns imperialism. The antinomian holds that faith alone—absent obedience to the moral law—suffices for salvation. Anti-Judaism in this sense emerged out of the struggles between early Christian “Judaizers,” who insisted that in order to be Christian one must first become Jewish and observe practices such as circumcision, and “universalizers,” who insisted that the fledgling faith was open to everyone: one needn’t be a member of the Jewish community to become a catechumen within “the body of Christ on earthly pilgrimage.”

In their struggle for recognition, early Christians needed to define their faith against something else: No, we aren’t them, although there may be similarities; we are us, and here’s why. Anti-Judaism in this early form emerged from the dynamic of Christians distinguishing themselves from their closest brothers and sisters, the Jewish people.

The danger with such distinction-making is that over time differences may harden into destructive divisions. I say “maybe” because it isn’t clear to me that this must happen in every case. It did happen between Christians and Jews in many times and many places, including hideous equations of Jews with the Antichrist. This malign anti-Judaism remains different from the racial doctrines of modern anti-Semitism, but easily segues into it.

Arendt, who was speaking philosophically when she said there is no necessary link between the two, overstated her case. Anti-Judaism, to the extent that it led to

destructive division between Christians and Jews, made those who adhered to this form of anti-Judaism more receptive to modern race theories.

However, those who claim that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is anti-Semitic either fail to make any distinctions between anti-Judaism and race-based anti-Semitism, or collapse them into one another. The film has nothing to do with modern anti-Semitism even if critics believe that it contains negative images of the Jewish leadership in Roman-controlled Palestine.

Second, the evidence is that Gibson's film has solidified positive views of Judaism. Jesus, his mother and his disciples (save for Judas) are represented in a positive light, as are the Jewish people, including Veronica (who offers Jesus water) and Simon of Cyrene. The group urging Jesus' condemnation by no means represents the views of all of the "Jewish people."

Third, the sources of anti-Semitism in the West today are not religiously derived, but emanate from the political left in Western Europe (and in some scholarly circles in the United States). Propaganda from such sources typically begins by denouncing Israel in intemperate terms and exculpating the Palestinians, including suicide bombers, as a necessary response to Israel's perfidy.

In peace marches in Paris before the Iraq War, some protesters carried signs that read "Death to the Jews" and equated Sharon with Hitler—only 60 years after France turned over French Jews to German occupiers for shipment to death camps. The Christian community, which scarcely exists in any robust form nowadays in Western Europe, is not the locus of this anti-Semitism. It derives from left-wing media and political advocacy.

This political stance can morph into anti-Semitism. In France today, vitriolic denunciations of Israel from the political left make it more difficult for French public opinion to come to grips with violent assaults on Jews that have come primarily from immigrant Muslim males stirred up by radical Islamist propaganda. This hatred of the Jews is an unholy combination of hoary stereotype and modern racist strands of anti-Semitism.

It is not surprising, finally, that those who fear any resurgence of anti-Semitism or find nothing good in the Christian tradition should see in Gibson's film a form of anti-Judaism indistinguishable from modern anti-Semitism. More charitably, a viewer who understands the distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism will see the

beginnings of the struggle for recognition and definition. Those with a mind to do so will mine *The Passion of the Christ* for anti-Judaism of a destructive kind rather than see the predictable anti-Judaism that is recognizable to anyone who has studied religious and political history and the “politics of recognition.” Persons of good will differ on this. But that is the ground on which a useful debate might take place.