

REVIEW

Robert Wistrich

*A Lethal Obsession:
Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*

(New York: Random House, 2010), hardcover, 1184 pp.

Reviewed by Christopher M. Leighton, Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies

In *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*, Robert Wistrich has assembled a mind-boggling amount of data and chronicled a pattern of anti-Jewish hostility that makes unmistakably clear the resilience and adaptability of this worldwide pathology. Renowned for his book *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* and the PBS series of the same name, Wistrich, a professor of modern European history at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is an exceptionally qualified guide through this treacherous landscape. Although the subtitle of Wistrich's book indicates a panoramic view, the overwhelming bulk of the book addresses the problems of antisemitism in the wake of WWII.

He begins by exploring the European Christian culture that "incubated" an ideology of hate (p.79). However, he gives little attention to the historical and literary contexts that sparked Christian anti-Judaism, and his sketch of the transition from the New Testament period to the patristic period suffers from a lack of engagement with important scholarly studies (e.g., Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983; and Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*. Doubleday: New York, 2008). Instead, he focuses on mythic constructs that captured the medieval European imagination. This Judeophobia cast the Jews as a deicide people and accused them of seeking to undermine Christendom. Wild allegations were etched into the popular culture, especially chimerical images of a Jewish population in blind pursuit of power and global control. These conspiratorial fantasies revealed the demonic depths to which the Jews were said to go in repeating the murderous behaviors of their ancestors. Accusations of blood libel, host desecration and well-poisoning that spread the bubonic plague were cited as evidence of a satanic Jewish plot by those opposed to God and God's Church. This is a sweeping survey that largely recapitulates the pioneering work of Joshua Trachtenberg (*The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*. Second ed. Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1993), but the analysis lacks the morphological precision of Gavin Langmuir (*Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990).

Wistrich's main contribution is his demonstration of the fluidity of this mythic structure and its persistent manifestation around the world in the twentieth century. Even though the supernatural elements dissolved in the waters of secularism, the conspiratorial pattern that enshrines Jews as ineradicably 'other' was sustained through a pseudo-scientific account of "blood purity" (p. 106) that initially emerged during the Spanish Inquisition. The move to define the Jewish people in terms of an immutable identity was a shift away from the traditional Christian view. No longer were Jews regarded as a people that could be redeemed through conversion. This development set the stage for a racist ideology in which Jewish identity is construed as genetically

determined, a biological formulation that undergirded the Nazi eliminationist ideology. Yet the mutation of traditional anti-Judaism into modern antisemitism raises unsettled and unsettling questions: To what extent did the Third Reich represent a tradition continuous with the Christian legacy of anti-Judaism? To what degree is Julius Streicher, the Nazi propagandist, accurate in his assertion that the Third Reich invented nothing that had not been espoused previously by Christians (p. 94)?

With special attention directed to eliminationist expressions of antisemitism, Wistrich then gives his readers a global tour of the post-WWII era. The evidence that he marshals to document the intractable and pervasive (a word he repeatedly uses) character of antisemitism is overwhelming. It is especially unnerving that there is so little repetition in its nine hundred pages.

Of particular concern to Wistrich is the recasting of traditional anti-Jewish tropes into an anti-Zionist platform that has garnered support in many places, not only in the Middle East but Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The global dissemination of antisemitism comes into sharp focus in his thirteenth chapter, "Bigotry in the United Nations." Although Wistrich's narrative is one-sided in his defense of Israel, these pages nonetheless ought to foster serious doubts among those who endorse the UN as a trustworthy and balanced arbitrator in the region.

In this chapter, Wistrich considers how the UN moved from its support of two independent states, Israel and Palestine, in 1947 to its indictment of Zionism as racism in its infamous 1975 Resolution 3379. The dramatic shift in the assessment of Israel at the UN occurred in the 1960s along with the influx of often hostile, newly independent African nations, the disproportionate numerical weight of countries from Central and South America, and mounting opposition from the Communist Bloc. Within an increasingly hostile international climate, the UN provided a respectable forum in which to promote the proposition that "Zionism equals racism, equals colonialism, equals occupation, equals dispossession" (p. 491). Wistrich notes that "a third of all critical resolutions passed by the UN Human Rights Commission during the past forty years have been directed exclusively at Israel. By way of comparison, there has not been a single resolution even mentioning the massive violations of human rights in China, Russia, North Korea, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Syria, or Zimbabwe" (p. 487). The branding of Israel as an "international outlaw" and "an apartheid enemy of humanity" continues to be endlessly repeated within UN circles and among a broad network of NGOs, including respectable organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Christian Aid (p. 489).

The final segment of Wistrich's book documents the spread of antisemitism within the Islamic world. Among Western exports, the polemical vitriol embodied in works such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has been widely disseminated and enthusiastically consumed. While Wistrich cites problematic passages within the Koran and explores the disturbing embellishments of more recent Muslim leaders, it is the fusion of Christian and Muslim conspiratorial fantasies that he says is especially toxic. Wistrich analyzes the combustible properties of this mixture by breaking down the compound elements of Hamas' charter and Hezbollah's platform. The book brings readers to the nadir of contemporary antisemitism when Wistrich maps the contours of this obsession in the proclamations of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His yearning for an apocalyptic confrontation in which the forces of good finally crush the forces of evil reveals a pathological quest that Wistrich fears will end in monumental devastation.

The proverbial Jewish telegram reads: "Start worrying. Details to follow." Wistrich has packed the details into this tome and provided reasonable grounds for high anxiety. What Wistrich does not provide is a contextually nuanced analysis of antisemitism, one that differentiates the divergent roles that antisemitism plays around the globe and the varied uses to which this animus is put.

Nor does Wistrich offer readers the rhetorical tools to decipher the language of antisemitism. It is misleading to draw a straight line from the anti-Jewish excesses of St. John Chrysostom to the death camps in Auschwitz. In a similar way the polemical accusations in the Koran do not lead inexorably to the antisemitic rants of Islamists or the genocidal fantasies of Iran's most militant mullahs. Wistrich suggests that the genocidal impulse of antisemitism is immutable, and this assessment ends up enshrining Jews as an eternal target. He pays little attention to some of the more promising educational and social changes over the past five decades that have done much to hold this noxious legacy in check. There are important scholarly and popular initiatives that have exposed the dangers of antisemitism and offered constructive guidelines for action, especially among Christians and Jews. Political and religious leaders in the West have tools to dismantle some of the most deadly anti-Jewish teachings. These triumphs, however limited, do not factor into Wistrich's account. As a result of these omissions, the reader learns little about the resistance that our religious and educational communities can successfully mount. In the face of a global obsession that so readily turns lethal, Wistrich's readers will need to look elsewhere if they hope to combat the forces of despair.