Religion & Philosophy

The New Anti-Semitism

"In the Name of the Other: Reflections on the Coming Anti-Semitism" by Alain Finkielkraut, in *Azure* (Fall 2004), 13 Yehoshua Bin-Nun St., Jerusalem, Israel.

The easy explanation for the burned synagogues, profaned cemeteries, and schoolyard taunts of contemporary France is that they are a revival of Europe's ancient anti-Semitism—the same enmity that spawned Shakespeare's grotesque caricature of Shylock, kindled the Dreyfus affair, and culminated in the Holocaust. Too easy, writes Finkielkraut, a lecturer in social sciences at Paris's École Polytechnique. Today's anti-Semitism flourishes in some of the most "enlightened" quarters of French society.

The roots of this new anti-Semitism lie in Europe's reaction to the Holocaust. America's reaction to that horror has been strong but relatively uncomplicated: It was an abomination on foreign soil, and Americans helped put an end to it. But the Holocaust placed Europe in a more troubled position, in which it assumed "the roles of vanquisher, victim, and criminal all at once. The Final Solution took place on its land; the decision was a product of its civilization; and the enterprise found no shortage of accomplices, mercenaries, executors, sympathizers, and even apologists well outside of Germany's borders." So Europe has taken on the identity of Albert Camus' "penitent-judge," who, Finkielkraut explains, "takes pride in his penitence and is always on guard against himself." It has "broken with its bloody past, intent on remembering only its radical evil." No longer does Europe think of itself first as the home of Dante, Mozart, Picasso, and Fellini. "It must unburden itself by switching from an *admiring* humanism to a *reviling* one." Europeans thus say "never again" to Auschwitz—and to war, power politics, nationalism, and all the other things they think drove them to Auschwitz.

One of the Holocaust's lessons for Europeans is that one must always side with "the Other," according to Finkielkraut, and for decades after 1945, Jews retained that status. But with the rise of Palestinian militancy, and in recent years the hard line of Israeli

Gravestones desecrated by swastikas and other anti-Semitic slogans at the Jewish cemetery of Herrlisheim are one sign of an upsurge of anti-Semitism in France.

prime minister Ariel Sharon, Palestinians have claimed the victim's mantle. Now they are the Other, while Israel—warlike, nationalist, and racist, in Europe's eyes—embodies everything that Europe has rejected.

In France, Finkielkraut shared the sense of relief that inspired huge, joyful crowds to take to the streets on the day in May 2002 when the right wing's Jean-Marie Le Pen went down to defeat in the presidential election. But he didn't join the throngs, thinking, "The future of hatred is in *their* camp, and not in that of Vichy's faithful. It is in the camp of the smiles, not of the gritted teeth. In the camp of humane, and not barbaric, men. In the camp of integrated society, rather than that of the ethnic nation. . . . It is in the ranks of the devoted admirers of the Other, and not among the narrow-minded petit bourgeois who love only the Self."

Rights as Aspirations

"Elements of a Theory of Human Rights" by Amartya Sen, in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Oct. 2004), 130 Corwin Hall, Princeton Univ., Princeton, N.J. 08544.

Never mind all those lofty pronouncements in America's Declaration of Independence, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea that humans have rights without specific legislation giving the rights legal definition and force is just "nonsense upon stilts," utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) asserted—and many modern thinkers agree. But Nobel laureate Sen, an economist at Harvard University, takes an opposing view.

Human rights are "primarily ethical demands," he says. Though they often inspire legislation, they're not mainly legal commands. They derive their importance from the underlying freedoms that they're

EXCERPT

Islamism's End Game

Looking back after 9/11 it seems to me that the left-wing terrorism of the 1970s in Europe was . . . a futile attempt to break out of the historical impasse and terminal structural crisis reached by communism, radical labor movements, Third Worldism, and revolutionary trends everywhere. The terrorism of that period was the first visible manifestation of that impasse and the prelude to the final demise of those movements, including world communism itself.

Today the hard-core Islamists' spectacular terrorist violence reflects a no less desperate attempt to break out of the historical impasse and terminal structural crisis reached by the world Islamist movement in the second half of the 20th century. I predict this violence will be the prelude to the dissipation and final demise of militant Islamism in general. Like the armed factions in Europe who had given up on society, political parties, reform, proletarian revolution, and traditional communist organization in favor of violent action, militant Islamism has given up on contemporary Muslim society, its sociopolitical movements, the spontaneous religiosity of the masses, mainstream Islamic organizations, the attentism of the original and traditional Society of Muslim Brothers (from which they generally derive in the way the 1970s terrorists derived from European communism), in favor of violence.

—Sadik J. Al-Azm, an emeritus professor of modern European philosophy at the University of Damascus, Syria, in *Boston Review* (Oct.–Nov. 2004)