



Religious Modernism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism in Polish Catholicism and Egyptian Islam

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Abstract

The two regions most commonly associated with antisemitism, whether fairly or not, are interwar Eastern Europe and, more recently, the Arab Middle East. However, while East European antisemitism is usually seen as “primordial” and having deep roots in Christianity, its Middle Eastern counterpart is generally perceived as exquisitely modern and having relatively little to do with traditional Islam. Therefore, even though Christian East European and Muslim Middle Eastern variants of antisemitism may make use of the similar myths and tropes, their respective histories and underlying causes appear to be quite different, and it may seem that little could be gained from studying them side by side. This paper presents the argument that studying East European and Middle Eastern antisemitism side by side is not only methodologically admissible but can lead to illuminating insights. The paper focuses on the two regions’ largest states, Poland and Egypt, and lays the groundwork for a more detailed examination of the manner in which Christian and Islamic traditions interacted with modern nationalist ideologies in the discursive construction of “the Jews” as a universal enemy.

Introduction

With the obvious exception of Nazi Germany, the two regions most commonly associated with antisemitism, whether fairly or not, are interwar Eastern Europe and, more recently, the Arab Middle East (Lewis: 195; Hagen: 351). However, while both are associated with hatred of the Jews, the origin and nature of that hatred are generally seen as being quite different in the two regions. East European antisemitism is often seen (especially by scholars from outside the region) as ancient, primordial, and conditioned by two separate phenomena. First, modern East European antisemitism is generally believed to be greatly

influenced by traditional Christian “anti-Judaism” or “Judeophobia,” terms which are generally understood to mean opposition to the followers of Judaism on theological grounds, rather than to the Jews as a people, ethnic group, or “race.” Second, this religiously inspired prejudice is viewed as having been reinforced, especially in the era of modernization, by a socioeconomic structural divide between Jewish and non-Jewish communities, which according to some scholars, rendered some sort of conflict between the two groups virtually inevitable (Marcus: 233).

While East European antisemitism is seen as primordial and having deep roots in Christianity, its Middle Eastern counterpart is generally perceived as exquisitely modern and having relatively little to do with traditional Islam. Furthermore, where the former is thought to be indigenous, the latter is seen as a very recent import from Europe. Finally, whereas East European antisemitism is seen as rooted in socioeconomic realities, its Middle Eastern counterpart is thought to have a very specific political origin – the Arab-Jewish and, after 1948, Arab-Israeli conflict. This view of the origins of Arab antisemitism is espoused not only by pro-Arab historians. For example, even Bernard Lewis takes this view, despite being generally regarded as hawkish, pro-Israeli, and anti-Palestinian.

Therefore, while East European and Middle Eastern variants of antisemitism may make use of similar myths, tropes, and symbols (most of them, incidentally, of West European provenance) their respective histories and underlying causes appear to be quite different, and it may seem that little could be gained from studying them side by side. This cautionary insight is further reinforced by historians’ preference for specificity over generalization and reluctance to undertake comparative studies, especially between different regions or “civilizations” (Baldwin: 1). Nevertheless, this paper will undertake the challenge of showing that studying East European and Middle Eastern antisemitism side by side is not only methodologically admissible but can lead to illuminating insights.

More specifically, the paper will focus on the two regions’ largest states, Poland and Egypt, and attempt to lay the groundwork for a more detailed examination of the manner in which Christian and Islamic traditions interacted with more modern nationalist ideologies in the creation of hatred and barriers of exclusion against the Jews. The goal of the paper is not to present new empirical research. Rather, it will conceptualize a comparative approach to the subject, present an argument for utilizing a trans-regional comparative perspective in studying the history of ethno-religious hatreds, and offer a preliminary hypothesis regarding the relationship between nationalism, religious modernism, and antisemitism.

The Comparative Method in History

The comparative method, as it is traditionally understood in the social sciences, involves the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical process or phenomenon in several cases, in order “to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events.” It constitutes an attempt to approximate a scientific experiment and, therefore, the cases under comparison should ideally “resemble each other in every respect but one” (George and Bennet: 151). The goals of this paper are more modest. Whereas social scientists favor comparisons, historians prefer the practice of transnational history, a term that best describes the quest to move beyond the nation-state and its boundaries in mapping out the framework of historical inquiry. The popularity of transnational history has

doubtlessly been reinforced by globalization, and the focus on explicitly transnational themes, such as migration, empire, and movement (whether of people, ideas, or things) across boundaries. But does a *comparison* of two societies with very little mutual interaction make sense, even in the context of transnational history? The great French social historian Eric Bloch, a proponent of transnational and comparative historical approaches, cautioned against comparing societies “far removed from each other in space and time” (Sewell: 214). In my view, cross-regional comparisons even, or precisely, between very different societies and “civilizations” are implicit in the program of transnational history. If the goal of transnational history is to move beyond the narrow and artificial confines of the nation state, and provide researchers with a broader perspective, then moving beyond regional, disciplinary, and “civilizational” boundaries is a logical, and in fact necessary, extension of this project. Borders between “civilizations” are invented and artificial (which does not mean that they cannot be useful for certain purposes) to the exact same extent as national borders, and if we strive to transcend the latter we must also challenge the former.

In fact, the division of the world into regions or “civilizations” can be even more problematic for historians and social scientists than its division into nations. Divisions between regional fields subtly but powerfully reinforce existing regimes of power. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said has followed up on Michel Foucault’s insight that knowledge is intimately related to power, and showed that the emergence of the very field of “Middle Eastern Studies” cannot be disassociated from the projection of Western power onto a less powerful “Other,” unable to respond in kind. More recently scholars have followed Said in showing how the creation of an “Eastern” Europe served a related, though not identical, function in the construction of the self-congratulatory myth of the progressive West (Wolff: 360). By insisting on treating regions or “civilizations” in isolation and only comparing “similar” (i.e. “Islamic” or “East European” or “Western” or “non-Western”) societies, we cannot help but reinforce our received mental constructions such as the “Orient” (even if we call it the Middle East) or “Eastern Europe” (even if we now call it “Central”). Scholars of Islam and the Middle East, in particular, have often claimed that the lack of comparative cross-regional studies between the Middle East and other areas “pathologizes” their region (L. Anderson: 78). The solution to this problem is to purposefully break with traditional disciplinary/regional boundaries, which cannot help but accentuate differences between “civilizations,” and to reach across cultures and regions to seek out what is common. In sum, I believe that from the perspective of transnational history there is an intrinsic value in cross-regional comparisons, even if the regions or states in question are not exerting direct influence upon one another.

According to Peter Baldwin, the most effective uses of comparative history are “those which, eschewing generalizations, formulate arguments at a middle range, about differences and similarities . . . that allow us to understand the issue at hand . . . better than had we limited our scope to only one country” (11). In other words, while comparative history has to give up on the social scientific ambitions of providing “explanation,” it must nevertheless yield the latter’s less hubristic cousin, insight. Examining a rather similar process (the adoption of antisemitic ideologies by national-religious movements) in two very different contexts can, at least potentially, allow us to see commonalities which would remain obscured if each case were studied on its own. Furthermore, such an enterprise will force us

to juxtapose not only the phenomena we study but, equally important, to critically examine received historiographical traditions, scholarly vocabularies, methodological approaches, and explanations, which are too often almost hermetically sealed in their own areas of study. Therefore, examining two processes side by side and using a common analytical framework can force us to look outside of the traditional disciplinary “boxes.” In this particular case, I will attempt to show that it can help us see seemingly well known phenomena in a new light.

Modernity, Nationalism, Religion, and Antisemitism

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define key terms that are often employed in different ways in different historiographic traditions. This paper will look at the development of antisemitism in the context of the interplay of nationalism, religion, and modernity, and it is necessary to provide a working definition of these terms. “Modernity” will be used to refer to a cluster of related processes and discourses, such as rationalization, secularization, industrialization, capitalism, and the rise of the nation-state, which followed the Enlightenment, first in Western Europe and later elsewhere. I will follow Benedict Anderson’s classic definition of nationalism to refer to the modern ideology that demands loyalty to a national community, imagined as inherently limited to a particular group of people and sovereign over them (6-7).

“Religion” is somewhat more complicated.¹ Both Christians and Muslims define their identities by adherence to teachings contained in their respective sacred texts (supported of course, by a body of traditions, institutions, and interpretations). While the central message of both the Bible and the Qur’an is opposed to the spirit of racial hatred, both sacred books contain passages that can be used to support a negative stance towards the Jews. The goal of this paper, however, is to not study the teachings of Christianity or Islam on the subject of antisemitism but, rather, to examine how the latter came to be embraced by particular members of Christian and Muslim communities, at a particular time and in particular places. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I will dispense with a formal definition of religion and instead refer to the historically constituted Catholic and Muslim communities of Poland and Egypt. I will simply refer to Catholics and Muslims as those people who identified themselves, and were recognized by their contemporaries, as such.

Perhaps, the most complicated term to define is “antisemitism.” First of all, antisemitism carries an extremely powerful emotional charge, which detracts from its use as an analytical term. As Ben Halpen writes, “it is hard to find anyone these days whom one could describe, however objectively, as an ‘antisemite’ without insulting him; and, obversely, it is not easy for anyone to report having been subjected to an ‘antisemitic’ action without being suspected of paranoid tendencies” (251). This certainly does not make it any easier to use antisemitism as an analytical term. According to Jacob Katz, antisemitism is a modern movement or ideology of opposition to the Jews, which originated in Germany in the 1870s, and which can be distinguished from earlier forms of anti-Jewish sentiment by being directed

¹As Talal Asad observes, the seemingly universal concepts of “religious” and “secular” are, in fact, rooted in Christian thought and practice and cannot necessarily be applied to other “religions” which “have their own disparate historical trajectories” (192). This makes it problematic to think of religion as an abstract category without reference to a particular tradition.

not against the Jews as followers of the religion of Judaism, but as a people (or ethnic group) imbued with certain traits and characteristics (4). But does antisemitism differ from forms of prejudice and ethnic hatred against other ethnic or religious groups?²

I agree with scholars like Bernard Lewis, Gavin Langmuir, and Leon Poliakov, who follow Sartre in portraying antisemitism as different from other forms of ethnic hatred (Smith: 240). This difference is based not on the identity of the group targeted by hate, but on the particular nature of the claims made against it. Negative stereotypes of certain groups held by others are as old as history, and as often as not, rooted in a history of genuine conflict over territory or resources. We can say this with regards to mutually negative stereotypes held by some Poles and Russians, or Arabs and Kurds. Antisemitism is different. Its radically irrational and visceral nature is perhaps best summarized by Norman Cohn, a historian commissioned by the British Army to study Nazi literature. While reading the Nazi materials, Cohn writes, “I began to suspect that the deadliest form of antisemitism has little to do with real conflicts of interest between living people, or even with racial prejudice as such. What I kept coming across was, rather, a conviction that Jews – all Jews everywhere in the world – form a conspiratorial body set on ruining and then dominating the rest of mankind” (Smith: 39). Langmuir uses the terms “demonology” and “chimeria” to describe this kind of Manichean division of humankind, and the hatred it can create (Smith: 41). Bernard Lewis offers a similar opinion. According to Lewis, it is “misleading” to use the term antisemitism to denote “normal prejudice against the Jews” (whatever that may mean) or opposition to Zionism. Rather, Lewis writes, “the antisemitic view of history portrays the Jew as a satanic force, as the root of virtually all evil in the world . . . engaged in an eternal and universal conspiracy to infiltrate, corrupt, and ultimately rule the gentile world” (20-23). I will employ this restrictive definition when I use the term antisemitism in relation to both Egypt and Poland.

Antisemitism and Catholicism in Poland

Older historiography on Polish-Jewish relations in the interwar period is fraught with debate over the extent of Polish antisemitism, a question that continues to fuel public debate in Poland today.³ However, more recently, even observers sympathetic to Poland have tended to admit that by the late 1930s antisemitism among many Poles had reached the levels of “psychosis” (Miłosz: 273). Furthermore, there is widespread agreement as to the

² Recently, attempts have been made to equate antisemitism with other forms of ethnic, racial, or religious prejudice or hatred. For example, the newly popularized term “Islamophobia” is often seen as the supposed mirror image of antisemitism, directed against Muslims. This term has an interesting Polish parallel in the expression “antypolonizm,” which is often (though not exclusively) used by the Polish right to deflect any criticisms of Poland or the Catholic Church emanating from liberal, Western and, especially, Jewish circles. I argue that extremely important differences exist between these forms of prejudice and antisemitism.

³ Ezra Mendelsohn divided traditional historians of Polish-Jewish relations into “Polish” and “Jewish” camps (3-13). According to Mendelsohn, historians of the “Jewish camp” often implicitly assumed a connection between Polish antisemitism and the crimes later perpetrated by the Germans (with occasional help from some Poles) on Polish soil. Polish historians, conversely, have tended to ignore or play down Polish antisemitism. The uproar and public debate occasioned by the Polish edition of Jan Gross’ book *Neighbors*, which described the murder of Jewish inhabitants of a village by their Christian neighbors in Nazi-occupied Poland, illustrates the extent to which this question still polarizes contemporary Poles.

causes of interwar Polish antisemitism. The majority of historians studying interwar Poland basically agree with contemporary observers, who saw the enmity between Polish and Jewish communities as being conditioned by and functionally inscribed into the class and ethno-religious structures of interwar Polish society (Hagen: 380; Marcus: 233.). Obviously, the particularities of Poland's Jewish community cannot be dismissed when explaining Polish antisemitism. Numbering roughly 10% of the country's population, Polish Jews were almost unassimilated. They spoke their own language (Yiddish), followed their own customs, and many had very little interaction with the non-Jewish world. Moreover, due to the particularities of Polish history, until the nineteenth century, the Jews had *de facto* constituted Poland's middle class. As a result of this historical legacy, in the interwar period, Jews still made up a disproportionately large number of university graduates, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and other professionals, and played an even more disproportionate role in commerce (Marcus: 67). While these facts could indeed lead the emerging Polish Christian middle classes to view their Jewish competitors as a threat, they do not tell the whole story. In particular, they do little to explain the unquestionably close association between antisemitism and certain strands of Polish Catholicism. To understand why this was the case, we must move beyond socioeconomic explanations and examine the emotive and discursive universes of Polish antisemites.

How did so many Polish Catholics come to embrace nationalism and antisemitism? While it is common to see Polish nationalism as steeped in Catholic iconography, the alliance between Catholicism and Polish nationalism was by no means preordained. Indeed, at first glance the universality of Roman Catholic claims would seem to clash with the nationalists' devotion to a particular nation, even when the latter clashed with the Christian injunction to love one's neighbor. Furthermore, modern antisemitism, which attacked the Jews on racial or ethnic grounds, and was harshest in its attacks on "modern" secular Jews, seems to be far removed from traditional Christian "Judeophobia." Indeed, as late as the end of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church in Poland was generally critical of modern antisemitism and denounced Poland's first antisemitic publications (Porter 2003: 415-29).

To understand the process by which the *de facto* alliance between Catholicism and a certain brand of Polish nationalism took place, it is necessary to briefly examine the intellectual dilemmas facing Polish Catholics and the Church at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While it is contemporary Islam that is often singled out as the religion that failed to adapt itself to the challenges posed by modernity, during the nineteenth century the same claim could easily have been made with regard to the Catholic Church (Blackbourn: 780). Even as the Church lost the last vestiges of her temporal power in Italy, and was facing increasing challenges in its spiritual hold over the masses throughout the world, it continued to reject the modern era of democracy, liberalism, and secularism. In Poland, the Church's preference for conservative authoritarian regimes (even if they were Russian Orthodox) over revolutions made for a rocky relationship between Catholicism and the revolutionary and radical Polish national movement.

According to Carl Schorske, the moribund Church, and politically minded Catholics throughout Europe, would discover not only a "new vitality" but even an "aggressive spirit" only after "the faithful reexamined modern society for its possibilities" (141). The process by which the Church came to acknowledge that modernity was a force to be engaged, rather

than simply combated and rejected, was a slow and complex one. However, “by the interwar years, most Catholics (in Poland and the Vatican) were recognizing that they had to engage the modern world and that to do so they would have to make some revisions in their practice and their rhetoric” (Porter 2005: 119). But what did this “engagement” mean?

It seems to have implied not only finding a distinctly Catholic answer to the spiritual problems of the modern era, but also to the social problems that underlay them, such as a distinctly new kind of working class poverty, social inequality, and class conflict – in sum, the whole slew of socioeconomic dislocations wrought by modernity. The purveyors of various secular ideologies, from liberals to socialists to anarchists, had already tried to give their diagnoses, and solutions, of these problems. How would the Church diagnose the causes of these modern ills?

Of course, there was not a single answer to this question, and a comprehensive treatment of this issue cannot be given within the scope of this paper. For our purposes, however, it is important to note that some Catholics began to see the negative side of modernity, from liberalism to atheism, and from “international capitalism” to “international socialism” as being not simply the product of faceless social, economic, and political forces, but the result of specific human actors who secretly took it upon themselves to undermine the Church and all it stood for. Initially, the primary thrust of the Catholics’ suspicion was directed against the Masons, but by the early twentieth century many were becoming convinced that the breakdown of traditional society and the ferment of modernity was the work of a vast Jewish conspiracy (Kertzer: 130; Modras: 67).

In Poland, this new Catholic view of the Jews came in many ideological variations and shades of intensity, and its finer nuances and distinctions cannot be fully elaborated here. It was not shared by all Polish Catholics. Nonetheless, it was subscribed to by many senior churchmen, and even by Poland’s Cardinal Hlond, who offered the following thought on the subject:

The Jewish problem exists and will continue to exist as long the Jews will be Jews. It is a fact that the Jews combat the Catholic Church, that they persist in freethinking, that they constitute the front guard of godlessness, the Bolshevik movement, and subversive activity. The Jewish influence on norms is pernicious, while their publishing houses promote pornography. It is true that the Jews swindle, practice usury, and deal in live traffic [prostitution]. It is true that the influence of Jewish youth on Catholic youth is in general ethically and religiously negative (Muszyński).

Even though the Catholic Church had held a negative view of Judaism and the Jews since at least St. Augustine, claims such as Hlond’s were somewhat different. Traditional Catholic “Judeophobia” was couched in theological terms and, however nasty its practical manifestations may have been, could be understood as theological critique of Judaism as a religion rather than of the Jews as a people, race, or ethnic group. In this way, it was perhaps somewhat comparable to the Catholic attitude towards Protestants or Muslims. On the other hand, the new Catholic distrust of the Jews, even as expounded by Hlond, was directed precisely against those Jews who turned away from their religion, thereby supposedly becoming peddlers of capitalism, socialism, or any other modern, secular, and presumably

anti-Catholic, –ism. On a more popular and much more vicious level, this view was actively propagated by Fr. Maksymilian Kolbe's *Maly Dziennik* (The Little Daily), interwar Poland's most popular Catholic publication.

Meanwhile, a new strand of Polish nationalism had moved even further in an anti-Jewish direction. Polish nationalism (or patriotism) traces its intellectual heritage to the revolutionary and universalistic insurrectionary movements of the nineteenth century and to the Romantic poetry of writers like Adam Mickiewicz.⁴ The fiercely antisemitic nationalism, which was to reach massive proportions in the early twentieth century, is in fact a relatively new development, associated with rise of the National Democratic movement in the early 20th century.

Polish nationalism's slide towards antisemitism began with a young group of nationalists' intellectual revision of the Polish insurrectionary tradition. While this intellectual process cannot be traced here in its full detail, the two most important aspects of this (r)evolution were the National Democrats' acceptance of social Darwinism and their loss of faith in historical progress, which had sustained earlier Polish patriots. Liberals and Romantics alike had believed that they were on the right side in the historical struggle between the forces of progress and reaction, and that time would eventually bring about both national independence for the Poles and universal social justice for all peoples. The National Democrats, espousing a new pseudo-scientific Darwinian philosophy of struggle and an ethic "national egoism," as well as the biologically-based antisemitic ideology emanating from France and Germany, came to see the "otherness" of Jews, as well as other groups, as "eternally fixed" (Porter 2000: 200). In the Darwinian world of struggle between different national "organisms," the construction of an irreconcilably alien Jewish enemy fulfilled two crucial roles for the National Democrats. First, and most important, it helped them to imagine a fixed and exclusive Polish nation and mobilize it around a common enemy. Second, using a "broad" definition of "the Jews" helped the National Democrats to virtually monopolize the discursive field of the Polish nation and exclude their non-Jewish political opponents from *their* nation by labeling them as "Jews."

The National Democrat turn also marked a new relationship between Catholicism and Polish nationalism, which helped popularize the image of the "Pole-Catholic" (*Polak-Katolik*). However, the relationship between the National Democracy and the Church, especially in its early days was a stormy one. For their part, the early National Democrats saw the Catholic Church as a "national institution" and Catholicism as a historical aspect of Polish identity (though only one among many). Thus, they viewed the importance of Catholicism not in its facilitating the relationship between man and God, but in its ties to Polish culture and history. Traditional Catholics, naturally, disagreed with this view. Equally important, the spokesmen of the Polish Catholic Church initially strongly rejected the National Democrats' Darwinistic ethic of "national egoism," which they saw as flying in the face of Christian ethics and the obligation to universal love (Stachowiak: 41-43).

⁴ Without attempting to paint an overly rosy picture of Polish history, it may nevertheless be confidently stated that the traditional strain of Polish patriotism was left-leaning, deeply ambivalent about the Roman Catholic Church, and not programmatically antisemitic (even if there were antisemites among Polish patriots).

The synthesis of National Democrat nationalism and Polish Catholicism was greatly facilitated by their convergence on a set of common enemies – socialists, Communists, liberals, and most crucially, the Jews. For the early National Democrats, the Jews were an alien, subversive, and anti-Polish national or ethnic organism within what they thought should be an “ethnically Polish” state. For the Catholics, the Jews represented godlessness (which is especially ironic since the vast majority of Polish Jews were orthodox!), moral laxness, and the ferment of modernity. For both groups Jews were intimately associated with Poland’s greatest enemy – Communism. These two strains of thought, even if theoretically separate, could easily be blended into one conceptual cocktail. While many National Democrats remained closet agnostics or even atheists, and many Catholics (especially in the higher echelons of the Church hierarchy) remained suspicious of the Endecja’s prioritization of national goals over religious ones, for many Poles who identified with the “Polak-Katolik” label, the theoretical distinctions between religiously and nationalistically based antisemitism were irrelevant.

The linchpin holding the somewhat contradictory views of activist Catholic modernists and socially Darwinistic National Democrat nationalists together was the belief in a global Jewish sponsored conspiracy, which could be interpreted as including just about anyone, and being directed against anything held dear by those believing in it. In other words, what gave the Polak-Katolik identity its coherence, despite whatever theoretical contradictions may have existed between nationalism and Catholicism, was its fixation on a common *enemy*, who could be invoked to explain anything and everything.

One of the best examples of this fusion is Fr. Kazimierz Lutosławski, a Dominican priest, whose religious and nationalistic callings seemed to proceed hand in hand. Born in 1880, Lutosławski became involved in the Endecja movement as early as 1903, and soon became a friend and collaborator of Roman Dmowski. At the same time, unlike many early National Democrats, he was a convinced Catholic. In 1909, he decided to become a priest, and in 1914 joined the Dominican order. He was an active publicist, one of the founders of the scout movement in Poland, a deputy to the Parliament (*Sejm*) in the early days of the Second Polish Republic and, until his premature death in 1924, one of the most important parliamentarians of the National Democrat National People’s Union (*Związek Ludowo-Narodowy*). This “politician in cassock” was also the most prolific of a new breed of politically active National Democrat priests, who stressed both their nationalism and their absolute Catholic orthodoxy, and who were instrumental in mobilizing mass support for the National Democrats (Stachowiak: 54).

Lutosławski rejected Dmowski’s ethic of “national egoism,” and argued that Christianity provided the only legitimate political standard. Nonetheless, he argued that the nation was indeed the highest good in worldly life, “but only if it was a means to salvation and, as such, affirmed by the Church” (Stachowiak: 50). This somewhat odd argument made sense only if one assumed that the Polish nation, as a whole, stood for Catholicism, which in turn was made possible by the fact that, for Lutosławski, the Church and the nation had the same enemy – the Jews.

According to Lutosławski, “Poland had four partitioning powers, not three . . . Germans, Muscovites and Austrians, took her apart from the outside and used state power

to keep her enslaved; the fourth partitioning power, which ruled over the [Polish] nation from the inside and ate out its eyes and brains, conquered its proud spirit . . . and sought to use the Polish nest to erect a tower from which to rule over the world – was the Jews” (Lutosławski).

Given the Jewish plan for *world* domination, there was no need for distinction between the Jews as a threat to the nation and threat to the faith. They were a threat to everything dear to Lutosławski’s heart. Furthermore, the Jews could be invoked as the one actor behind *any* threat to Poland or the Church. “Let us not forget,” Lutosławski wrote, “that Soviet Russia is [but] a tool of Jews and that it wasn’t the Russian nation that waged war against us, but the Jewish tsar ruling over Russia; let us not forget that wherever we encountered the opposition of foreign powers, whether in London, Washington, Rome, or Paris, it was no one else but the Jews, who [told our enemies what to do]” (Lutosławski).

Clearly, for Lutosławski, the Jews could be used to explain absolutely anything, from Moscow to Washington, which threatened his vision of Poland. Of course it is easy to dismiss Lutosławski’s views as laughable. Let us not forget, however, that this was one of Poland’s most influential parliamentarians and one of the key authors of the 1921 constitution. Clearly, something in this vision struck an extremely powerful chord not only with secular nationalists, but with Lutosławski’s fellow Catholics – the National Democrat-Catholic synthesis became ever more powerful throughout the 1920s and 30s.

In the concluding section of this paper, I will theorize the relationship between this sort of conspiratorial worldview and religious modernism. First, however, I would like to examine the Muslim Egyptian path to antisemitism.

Antisemitism and Islam in Egypt

If the historiography of Muslim and Egyptian antisemitism shares anything with its Polish counterpart, it is the fact that both are mired in controversy. Yet, while the controversies involved in studying Polish antisemitism are largely (though not entirely) about the past, antisemitism in the modern Middle East is a controversy with enormous political implications for the present. The extremely politicized nature of this debate must be understood if it is to be transcended.⁵ On the one hand, pro-Israeli scholars routinely portray Muslim and Arab societies as permeated by antisemitism (Lewis: 139). Furthermore, while they paint a generally tolerant picture of pre-modern Islam, they go out of their way to stress the Arab-Nazi connections, such as the infamous case of Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem who cooperated with the Nazis and helped create the Bosnian Muslim division of the SS.⁶ Leftist scholars of the Middle East, on the other hand, regularly accuse their pro-

⁵ The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to divide the field of Middle Eastern studies, and underpins a number of seemingly methodological controversies in the field. For a discussion of these issues from a left-wing perspective, see Lockman. For a scathing attack on the supposedly pro-Arab bias of the entire field of Middle Eastern studies, see Kramer.

⁶ The Mufti is perhaps one of the most controversial characters in Middle Eastern history, which is certainly a considerable feat indeed. It is not my intention to enter the highly politicized debate around his importance in Arab history. For a discussion of the literature surrounding his legacy, see Achcar: 137-73.

Israeli colleagues of taking Arab antisemitism out of its political context in order to portray Arabs, and the Palestinian struggle, in a negative light. According to Joel Beinin, “collecting expressions of Muslim and Arab antisemitism has become a cottage industry among Israeli and Israeli-oriented Middle East scholars” (44). This is misleading, Beinin goes on to argue, because Arab expressions of antisemitism are made in the context of a political struggle with the Jewish state, which renders Arab “anti-Jewish sentiment” (he does not use the term antisemitism) political rather than religious, social, or racial, and hence differentiates it from European antisemitism (44).

Nonetheless, there are some points of relative agreement regarding the development of antisemitism in the Arab world. In the first place, pro-Israeli scholars, like Bernard Lewis, view Jewish history under Islam in relatively positive terms. To be sure, as in medieval Christendom, under traditional Islamic rule, the Jews (just like Middle Eastern Christians), were the subject of discrimination and contempt. However, if anything, their position was superior both to that of Middle Eastern Christians and to their Jewish coreligionists in Christian Europe. Anti-Jewish myths and conspiracies, such as the Blood Libel legend and accusations of ritual murder, made their way to the Middle East only under European influence and were initially spread by Middle Eastern Christians rather than Muslims (Landau).

Furthermore, the socioeconomic context for the spread of antisemitism in Egypt could not be any more different than in Poland. Egypt’s Jewish community was tiny and, except for some migrants from Europe, very well assimilated. In fact, if socioeconomic explanations for the development of ethno-religious hatred were to be sought, a much better target for hate would be Egyptian Christians or Copts. Indeed, in many ways, Christians in interwar Egypt occupied the same position as the Jews in Poland. They comprised some 10% of the population, were poorly integrated into Muslim society, were better educated than Muslims, and played a disproportionate role in the Egyptian middle class and in commerce. They could be, and often were, accused of collaboration with their Western coreligionists who occupied Egypt and controlled her politics from 1882 until 1953. Furthermore, Egyptian Muslim stereotypes of the Christians were very similar to Polish Christian stereotypes of the Jews (Wakin: 18). Nonetheless, while Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt have often been rocky, nothing comparable to Polish antisemitism ever developed in Egypt against the Christians. While this obviously is not conclusive evidence, it does suggest that socioeconomic “structural incongruities” between different communities are not, in themselves, enough to explain the development of ethno-religious hatreds.

At any rate, most scholars see Arab antisemitism not as an outgrowth of the Islamic tradition or indigenous socioeconomic conditions but as a recent European import. For pro-Israeli scholars, however, this European-Nazi connection of Arab antisemitism makes it all the more damning. For leftist pro-Arab scholars, on the other hand, the recent origins and (presumably) strictly political, rather than social or religious, nature of Arab “anti-Jewish sentiment” suggest caution in lumping Arab antisemites together with their European ilk.

The goal of this paper is not to engage this debate but to shift focus somewhat and attempt to look at the origins of Arab, and specifically Egyptian, antisemitism from a different perspective – that of the twin development of Egyptian nationalism and Islamic

modernism. More specifically, let us for a moment look beyond the endless debate of whether the anger of Egyptians and other Arabs over the creation of Israel is justified or not, and examine why and for whom the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine first became an issue of primary importance, and how it became tied to a hatred of *all* Jews. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand how the Palestinian conflict came to fit into the Egyptian Muslims' vision of their community. While many readers may suspect an automatic Egyptian Muslim concern for the fate of their Arab Muslim coreligionists in Palestine, that was simply not the case. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, both the established Egyptian *'ulema* (religious scholars) and nationalists showed little interest in the Palestinian question. In the Egyptian press of the 1920s, Palestine was given no more attention than other regional developments; even after the Wailing Wall disturbances of 1929, it received no more than "an occasional article or news report" (Jankowski: 3). The same was true of religious authorities – as late as 1929, Shaykh Muhammad Abu al-Fadl al-Jizawi, Supreme Shaykh of the Al-Azhar University refused to support petitions calling for help to the Palestinians (Al-'Uwaysi: 21). In sum, "Not only was Palestine a peripheral concern of Egyptian public opinion and a non-issue to the Egyptian government in the 1920s, but considerable sympathy was shown by some Egyptian publicists and politicians for the Jewish National Home emerging in Palestine" (Jankowski: 4).

In fact, it was only by the end of the 1930s that Palestine became a major issue in Egyptian political life, even though communal violence there had been endemic for over a decade. Therefore, while a part of the Egyptians' increased interest in the events in Palestine may be attributed to the constantly escalating level of tensions between Muslims and Jews there (spurred in part by the influx of Polish Jews, fleeing antisemitism in Poland), it does not tell the complete story. Indeed, to understand this surprising lack of attention displayed by Egyptians to the developments in Palestine, it is necessary to examine the development of Egyptian nationalist and Islamic political thought.

The disinterest of Egyptian nationalists in Palestinian affairs is relatively easy to explain. In the 1920s, Egyptian nationalism was still very much an elite phenomenon, consciously modeled on European examples (I. Mitchell: 540). Pan-Arabism, which has been associated with Egypt since the 1950s, was, in fact, a Syrian and Iraqi development and did not have widespread influence in the Nile Valley until much later. In the 1920s, nationalist leaders, including Sa'd Zaghlul, the architect of (formal) Egyptian independence, as well as intellectuals like Lufti al-Sayyid and the great writer, Taha Husayn, espoused a secular, civic, and territorial conception of Egypt, and saw her as a Mediterranean society more firmly tied to Europe than to the Arab world (Esposito: 69-72). Therefore, the nationalists' lack of interest in Palestine should not be surprising.

The question of Islam is more complicated. If the nineteenth century Catholic Church can be accused of having missed out on the developments of the modern world, the same claim can be made with regards to Egyptian Islam. And just as the Papacy had been made painfully aware of its failures to meet the modern world on the battlefield, the same was true to an even greater extent of the Islamic world. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most Egyptians politically identified themselves with the universal Islamic community (*umma*) and the Ottoman State, which made claims to the Caliphate and, hence, to the leadership of the Muslim world. During the course of the nineteenth century, both these

communities found themselves increasingly challenged by Christian Europe until, eventually, most of the *umma* and a good part of the Ottoman Empire came under direct European colonial rule.

The Muslim religious establishment in Egypt, best represented by the religious scholars (*ulema*) of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, had long ago abdicated its political prerogatives, first to the Ottoman Sultans, and then to the dynasty of Muhammad Ali. It was fundamentally conservative, and found itself ill prepared to offer a coherent and meaningful response to the problems posed by colonialism and the intrusion of modernity into Egyptian society (Hourani: 136-37). As a result, some Egyptian Muslims found themselves in a position not entirely dissimilar from that faced by Polish Catholics at roughly the same time – wondering how to offer a meaningful *religious* response to modernity. There were two important differences, however. First, in Poland this problem was engaged by wider strata of Catholic society as well as by the Church itself, whereas in Egypt the debate was limited to a narrower circle of intellectuals, and initially ignored both by the traditional *ulema* and the majority of the faithful. Second, those Muslim thinkers who did not reject modernity outright were, at least initially, quite optimistic about the promise of progress it offered.

Obviously, thoughtful Muslims reacted to this problematic in myriad ways, which cannot all be traced here. However, among the most influential responses, offered by a group of “outsider” religious scholars, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh, was Salafism (*salafiyya*).⁷ Today Salafism is most often associated with fundamentalism and even militancy. And, to be sure, for some thinkers who would later influence what we today call Salafism, such as the Saudi Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the return to Islamic purity meant little more than a reactionary literalism. But many early Egyptian salafis saw themselves as reformists, and believed that the pure or “true” Islam, which according to them had been buried under centuries of non-Islamic accretions and influences, was, in fact, fully compatible with modernity, or at least with what they saw as the latter’s salutary aspects. According to this view, what had made Islam great in the past was its ability to innovate and adapt novel lines of social and economic organization to suit different circumstances. The problem, as, John Esposito puts it, was that “by the tenth century, Islamic law, in the opinion of Muslim legal scholars, was finalized and institutionalized . . . the task of future generations was to follow God’s path set forth in authoritative legal manuals.” The door of personal interpretation (*ijtihad*) of Islamic traditions was henceforth considered closed by the consensus of legal scholars. The answer to the challenge posed by

⁷ Salafism or *salafiyya* derives its name from “the pious forefathers” *al-salaf al-salib*, the first three generations of Muslims who are regarded as exemplars of “pure” Islam, without the non-Islamic accretions which later penetrated the religion as a result of outside influences and corruption. While this may seem as an inherently fundamentalist position, the early Egyptian *salafis* believed that to “return” to the original and pure Islam it was necessary to examine *existing* Islam critically. In this sense, as Gilbert Achcar perceptively notes, they were not unlike the Russian Pan-Slavists whose project was not to defend an existing tradition but to “return” to a long-lost Utopia (thus *de facto* inventing a new tradition) (106). For a discussion of the complex relationship between the literalist and reformist strands of salafi thought, see Meijer: 3-13.

the modern world, according to the salafis, was to “reopen the doors of reasoning” and reinterpret Islam in a manner that was consistent with modernity.⁸

In contrast to Polish Catholics, some of the first salafi thinkers, such as al-Afghani and ‘Abduh were impressed by European liberalism and optimistic about finding a synthesis between modernity and Islam. All that was necessary was to *rediscover* the truth of Islam which had been buried under layers of superstition accrued over centuries of intellectual stagnation but which, once uncovered, would surely be compatible with the modern world. Some of their successors, however, took a more sinister view of modernity, or at least of its European version. In fact, they were bothered by some of the very same issues that galvanized many Polish Catholics: “political disunity, profound economic disparities, social dislocation, the growing indifference to religion in Egyptian society, [as well as] Western secularism and materialism” (Esposito: 137). This transformation from a positive to highly ambivalent valuation of modernity is perhaps best exemplified by the Lebanese-Egyptian thinker Rashid Rida, who as a student of ‘Abduh was initially open to Western liberalism but became increasingly skeptical of its moral dimension and, towards the end of his life, moved closer to Wahhabism, and the more conservative brand of Salafism emanating out of Arabia.

Rida played an influential role in shaping the worldview of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Society of the Muslim Brothers (*Jama‘at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen*), better known as the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), one of the most influential Islamist political figures and theoreticians of the twentieth century. Born in a lower middle class family in the town of Mahmudiyya, and educated as a schoolteacher, al-Banna was never regarded as a religious scholar by the traditional *‘ulema*. Nevertheless, he was not only a serious theoretician of political Islam but a charismatic leader, who founded the Brotherhood with six of his friends as the first members and developed it into a mass movement with over two million followers at a time Egypt’s population was only nineteen million. While al-Banna admired the power and technological prowess of the West, he took an extremely critical view of the latter’s moral dimension and of its impact on Muslim societies. As he writes of his memories of Cairo in the early 1920s: “A wave of dissolution which undermined all firm beliefs was engulfing Egypt in the name of intellectual emancipation. This trend attacked the morals, deeds, and virtues under the pretext of personal freedom. Nothing could stand against this tyrannical stream of disbelief and permissiveness that was sweeping our country. . . I saw the life of the beloved Egyptian people oscillating between her dear and precious Islam which she had inherited . . . and this severe Western invasion which was armed and equipped with all destructive influences of money, wealth, prestige, ostentation, an means of propaganda” (Lia: 28).

The Brotherhood was a mass movement dedicated to creating an Islamic, yet modern, society and state in Egypt. Its rhetoric stressed discipline, sacrifice, and ridding Egypt of pernicious Western ideologies and secular influences. Like the National Democrats and

⁸ Admittedly, the great historical irony of Salafism is that most of its adherents eventually ended up embracing a *de facto* conservative, literalist, and fundamentalist position on most issues. This process was further exacerbated by the influence of the Saudi fundamentalist ‘Abd al-Wahhab on Salafism. Still, Salafism is profoundly different from traditional or conservative Islam, and its current “fundamentalist” position on many issues should not obscure its origins as a reformist movement (Esposito: 22-23).

other Catholic organizations in Poland, the Brotherhood sought to limit social class conflict, and actively combated socialism and Communism. As Brynjar Lia describes it, the Brotherhood was “a new movement inspired by the modern principles of education, organization, and ideology, while at the same time keeping well inside the existing traditions and religious culture, thereby bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in the rapidly changing Egyptian society” (60).

In his self-conscious quest to turn the Brotherhood from religious society into a mass political movement, al-Banna found it helpful to provide particular aspects of the Islamic tradition with new emphasis. In one of his most important publications, *The Art of Death (Fann al-Mawt)*, al-Banna placed the idea of worldly, material, struggle at the center of his thought, and redeployed the traditional Islamic concept of *jihad* (R. Mitchell: 207). While the Islamic term *jihad* is often translated as “holy war,” and has indeed been used in this manner by Muslims, in the most general sense it refers to “the vocation of Muslims to strive or struggle to realize God’s will, to lead a virtuous life,” and does not necessarily have a political or martial dimension (Esposito: 12). Al-Banna, on the other hand, emphasized the political, martial, and worldly aspects of *jihad*, and placed it at the very core of the Brotherhood’s activist brand of Islam.

The issue that turned the Muslim Brotherhood into a mass movement was its involvement in the Jewish question in Palestine. Following al-Banna, the Muslim Brothers took up an interest in Jewish emigration to Palestine long before the mainstream religious establishment, the nationalist movement, or the Egyptian government. Even before the Arab Revolt of 1936, which brought the Palestinian issue to the awareness of most Egyptians, the Brothers collected funds, published articles, and advocated against the Zionist movement, which they already saw as a threat not only to Palestine, but to the entire Islamic world (Al-‘Uwaysi: 28-33). The Arab Revolt, which erupted in Palestine in 1936, gave the Brothers a cause to rally around and put a face on a hitherto faceless enemy by firmly linking their already prominent emphasis on *jihad* (which did not yet have a clear target) with the question of stopping Jewish emigration to Palestine.

Outrage at the events in Palestine was certainly not confined to the Brothers, but permeated a wide spectrum of like-minded salafi thinkers and organizations. It also prompted many, though certainly not all, to fundamentally reevaluate their opinion not only of Zionism but also of the Jewish people as a whole. For example, Rashid Rida, a thinker who had a profound impact on al-Banna and the subsequent development of Salafism, moved from a position of friendship and sympathy for the Jews to one which can only be called antisemitic. While Rida had once believed in finding a compromise between “the Arabs and their Hebrew cousins,” he now accepted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and came to the conclusion that the Jews were secretly working to undermine Christian Europe while at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, manipulating the Western powers and using their might against the Muslims (Achcar: 114-20).

But while the Brothers were not the only ones coming to see the Jews as the primary problem facing the Muslim world, al-Banna’s genius lay in his organizational ability, which brought the Brotherhood to an entirely new level of visibility and recognition. Egyptian Muslims’ growing concern with the situation in Palestine meant that the Brotherhood was

able to capitalize on its early adoption of this issue as one of its central planks, as well as on its quick and effective fundraising and propaganda campaigns – between 1936 and 1938, its membership grew from hundreds to hundreds of thousands (Gershoni: 390). Lia sees the Brothers' early adoption of the Palestinian causes as relatively "less fundamental" in explaining the Brotherhood's extraordinary growth in the late 1930s (241-42). While some historians have charged the Brothers with using the situation in Palestine "instrumentally," that is to bolster their position at home, it seems clear their activism was in line with their worldview and overall objectives (see Lia: 248-52). In fact, the Brothers justified their interest in the situation in Palestine in both religious and nationalist terms. While the Brotherhood is usually remembered for its opposition to secular nationalism and its conflict with Nasser's Pan-Arab dictatorship, in the interwar period al-Banna was perfectly willing to make common cause with the nationalist movement. At the same time, the Brothers "in effect pressed for a redefinition of Egyptian identity in terms of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism," and actively sought to exclude the Jews from the Egyptians' conceptions of their national community (Al-'Uwaysi: 74). Again they had the zeitgeist on their side because, throughout the 1930s, Egyptian nationalism took on an ever more Arab and more Islamic hue, as it moved down the social class ladder.

At any rate, there is nothing unusual in the Brothers wanting to help fellow Arab-Muslims in Palestine. What *is* most interesting for the purposes of this argument, is the manner in which the Brothers linked the particular issue of intercommunal conflict in Palestine to what they very quickly came to view as a global and omnipresent danger to the Islamic world as a whole – the Jews. While the Brotherhood's vision of a global Jewish conspiracy took some time to reach its fully mature form, its two most important elements were already in place by the 1930s. First, the Brotherhood's publications explicitly equated Jews with Zionists, while condemning the latter in the harshest possible terms, thus portraying *all* Jews as implacable enemies of Islam. Second, the Brothers effectively reinterpreted Islamic history to show "that there was a continuous struggle between Islam and the Jews, from the time of the Caliphs until more recent times," and that the Jews had always constituted a greater threat to the Islamic world than did the Christians. Finally, they came to see the Jews as not only external enemies, plotting an attack on Palestine, but also as internal ones, spreading a range of modern ills, from communism through capitalism to pornography, so as to undermine the Muslim world from within (Al-'Uwaysi: 8).

The Brothers' diagnosis of the threat posed to the Islamic *umma* by the Jews may seem somewhat odd, coming as it did at a time when British Christians still exercised control over Egypt, as well as over Jordan, Iraq, and Palestine (not to mention India!). The French ruled Syria, Lebanon, and North Africa, and the creation of the state of Israel was more than a decade away. Clearly, there was something different, almost from the very beginning, about the Muslim Brothers' response to Jewish settlement in Palestine, something that went beyond the kind of enmity reserved for run of the mill inter-ethnic conflicts with "mere" colonizers and occupiers, like the British or the French. In fact, in the early 1930s the Jews were well on their way to becoming Langmuir's "chimeria" – a universal, and universally evil, enemy.

A complete and systematic synthesis of this view would be completed by Sayyid Qutb, a Muslim Brother and probably one of the most important theorists of modern Islamism, in

his chilling work *Our Struggle with the Jews*. While Qutb was also highly critical of the West, his ire was concentrated on the Jews, whom he blamed for most of the corrupting influences of Western modernity, from socialism to Freudian psychology, to which the Muslim world was being subjected. Drawing selectively from the Qur'an, he projected the conflict between Jews and Muslims into the past and elevated it to one of the central motifs of Islamic history (Calvert: 167-71). His vision of a global Jewish conspiracy designed to undermine everything dear to his heart was not entirely dissimilar from the antisemitism of Polish Catholics like Lutosławski. According to Qutb:

The Jews plotted against Islamic history, its events and its great men, and sought to bring confusion to them. . . The Jews also conspired against and falsified the exegesis of the Qur'an. This is a very dangerous conspiracy . . . The Jews have installed men and regimes (in the Islamic world) in order to conspire against the (Muslim) *umma*. Hundreds then, even thousands, were plotting within the Islamic world. . . This conspiracy continues uninterrupted (Nettler: 75-76).

Qutb wrote these words in the early 1950s (the exact date is not known), that is after the creation of Israel, but all of the key elements of this vision were already in place among the Muslim Brothers by the late 1930s.

Conclusion

At first glance, it may appear that the two stories outlined above bear little resemblance. In Poland, the primary vehicle for political antisemitism was the National Democracy, a secular nationalist movement, albeit heavily permeated by Catholicism; in Egypt, it was the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious movement that was generally supportive of nationalist claims.⁹ In Poland, senior National Democrats seemed to have used religion instrumentally; in Egypt, there can be little doubt of the Muslim Brothers' leadership devotion to the faith. In Poland, antisemitism matured over a long time, and traditional and long-standing religious "Judeophobia" was combined with a more recent secular nationalist antisemitism. In Egypt, an antisemitism emphasizing both religion and ethnicity developed very rapidly despite the historical absence of a strong anti-Jewish bias in Egyptian Islam. Furthermore, unlike in Poland, it was developed by politically minded Muslims and was only later taken up by (some) nationalists. These observations may be interesting in that, in both cases, they point to a closer and more complicated relationship between religion and nationalism in constructing modern identities than is generally allowed by the theoretical literature on nation formation.¹⁰

At any rate, despite the differences outlined above, looking at the two cases side by side can shed new insight on the relationship between antisemitism and modernizing religious

⁹ Relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the nationalists broke down under Nasser, but under the monarchy the two groups shared many common goals.

¹⁰ All the "classic" studies of nationalism, such as those by Ernest Geller, Benedict Anderson, or Eric J. Hobsbawm, assume that the national community arises in opposition to earlier modes of social organization, including those based on religion.

movements in both countries. The first observation is perhaps most obvious. In both Poland and Egypt, hatred of the Jews adopted by large segments of the population went far beyond “normal” ethnic antagonism (such as that between the English and French, Poles and Germans, or Arabs and Kurds). Furthermore, in both countries antisemitism shared enough common features to allow us, despite the arguments of scholars like Joel Beinin, to speak of antisemitism as a single transnational phenomenon (44). Its key defining characteristic was the belief in a global Jewish conspiracy aimed at undermining traditional religious values (whether Catholic or Muslim), taking control of the political community, and ultimately controlling the entire world. Hence, for both Polish and Egyptian antisemites, the Jews were an “internal enemy” more persistent and more dangerous than real enemies (such as the English colonialists for the Egyptians or the genuinely threatening Russians and Germans for the Poles). Finally, this conspiracy included not only all Jews, regardless of their actual commitment to Judaism or their political views; it could also be expanded to include just about anyone working wittingly or unwittingly to support the “Jewish master plan.”

A comparison of the development of antisemitism in Egypt and Poland also illustrates some of the dangers of over-reliance on structural or political explanations of this phenomenon. It is certainly true that Polish antisemitism cannot be understood without reference to the economic competition between the Christian Polish and Jewish middle classes. Yet, the Egyptian example clearly shows that the very same ideas can become embedded in a society without a large or economically influential Jewish community. Rather, the notion of a “structural incongruity” between “Polish” and “Jewish” interests presupposes the existence of two impermeable, monolithic communities which have their own separate, clearly defined, and unitary interests. But why, we may ask, would a strong Jewish middle class *not* be in the interests of Polish society as a whole? The answer to this question is not at all self-evident. To understand why this was the case, it is necessary to look beyond economic and structural arguments and examine how Polish Catholic antisemites *defined* their interests.

The mirror image of this argument could be made with regard to Egypt. It is obviously true that the rise of Arab antisemitism cannot be understood without reference to the conflict in Palestine, but the important question is why did the issue of Jewish immigration to Palestine become so overwhelmingly important for the Egyptians, at a time when the majority of the Muslim world (including Egypt herself!) was still colonized by Christian European powers, and why did support for the Palestinians have to lead to the rise of hatred against *all* Jews? The existence of intercommunal conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine does not really allow us to answer either of these questions.

In both Poland and Egypt we can witness the spread of a very similar cluster of ideas and images – political conspiracy by (Jewish) “internal enemies” and the desecration of traditional cultural and religious values by (Jewish) agents of moral decay. In both places, there perhaps existed sufficient local political (in Egypt) or socioeconomic (in Poland) factors to help us understand the existence of some kind of animosity towards Jews by some non-Jews. However, these local factors do little to help us understand either the widespread belief in a global Jewish conspiracy or the radical, singular, and chimeric nature of antisemitism in both countries. Furthermore, by positing antisemitism as a “response” to “structural” or “political” factors we run the risk of replicating the arguments made by the

antisemites themselves and hence moving beyond explaining and towards (at least partially) validating their claims.

While the intellectual genealogy of both Polish and Egyptian antisemitism can be ultimately traced back to German sources, a much more interesting insight provided by the comparative perspective concerns the importance of *who* adopted antisemitic attitudes in the two countries and *why* they did so. In both countries, antisemitism was intimately related to religiously inspired movements, but it was a very particular brand of religion – neither the traditional piety of the masses nor the conservative faith of the Polish higher clergy or the Al-Azhar *‘ulema*. Rather, both the Muslim Brothers and the Catholic allies of the National Democrats should be seen as consciously attempting to shake up and modernize their respective religious traditions, make them relevant to the problems of modernity, and provide them with an activist and militant program not just for the other world but for *this* one, too. In order to provide their own answer to the ills of the modern world, both Muslims and Catholics had to first provide diagnoses of modernity. This was not an easy task, because both groups wanted to believe that some aspects of modernity (technology, science, economic growth) could be made fully compatible with their respective religious traditions, and disassociated from the pernicious trends accompanying them (materialism, “freethinking,” breakdown of traditional society).

But how could one offer a Catholic or Muslim critique of “global capitalism,” liberalism, and secularism without rejecting modernity wholesale? Or to put it differently, how could one critique the seemingly faceless processes of economic dislocation, liberalization, and secularization without retreating into the increasingly irrelevant anti-modernist bunker of traditional conservatism? One of the possible answers to this question was to find out *who was responsible* for the corruption that seemed to inevitably accompany modern life. If the source of this corruption could be eliminated, a true Catholic or Muslim modernity could be constructed. However crude this approach may appear, it was not new. The need for enemies is a strong and pressing one and appears in many societies and social contexts. As Richard Hofstadter observed in his seminal essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, the tendency to perceive decisive historical events “not as part of the stream of history” but as the consequences of the will and actions of small, secret, and sinister groups of plotters is deeply embedded on the right fringes of American political life (31-32). And the Jews have traditionally fit this role quite well, alongside the Jesuits, Illuminati, Masons, Catholics, and a number of others in many different societies and time periods. This kind of conspiratorial thinking was not limited to the right or religious movements – in fact, linking the Jews with the destructive side of modernity was a feature of French socialism for a good part of the 19th century (Katz: 107-28).

Nonetheless, I argue there is a reason why this line of thinking was *particularly appealing to modernizing religious movements*. In order to explain this, I utilize the theoretical framework developed by David Ost (21-38). While Ost applies his insight to explain politics in post-communist Eastern Europe, I believe that it can be applied to any society experiencing rapid social and economic change, such as that occasioned by the Polish and Egyptian encounters with modernity. According to Ost, capitalism, especially in its early stages, is always perceived as being opposed to prevailing notions of justice and, as such, generates anger. Politics, on the other hand, is largely about interpreting, articulating, and organizing this

anger. Socialists, liberals, and communists, each in their own way, attempted to provide rational, social, and economic diagnoses of, and solutions to, the ills and dislocations of modernity.

But the mechanics of power in modern societies is opaque, obscured by abstract, faceless, and extremely complex economic and social processes beyond the control of any individual, which are not easily explainable within the context of a traditional Christian or Muslim worldview. This opacity of government is especially true in quasi-colonial (Egypt) or recently decolonized (Poland) societies, where citizens are prone to see politics as a “puppet show in which foreign powers control the marionettes – the local politicians – with invisible strings” (Abrahman: 111). For some Muslims and Catholics, still deeply rooted in a non-rational, non-economistic view of the world, it was simply much easier to channel the anger created by modernity in terms of identity politics or, to put it more crudely, by finding someone to blame.

The very vulgarity and simplicity of this “explanatory myth,” to use Sartre’s term, is what gave it its immense rhetorical power (148). Conspiracy theories are extremely effective in filling “the epistemic black hole . . . created by the unsettling of moral communities” (Comaroff and Comaroff: 287). My argument, therefore, is that antisemitism among a certain brand of Egyptian Muslims and Polish Catholics cannot be understood as being simply the product of political or economic conditions. Rather, it was accepted by many Muslim and Catholic “modernizers” because it provided a simple but powerful diagnosis of the problems of modernity, a crystal-clear focus for political action, and an all-explaining Manichean vision of history that imbued this action with dramatic significance.

It bears adding that there is nothing deterministic about the dynamics I have attempted to portray above. Not all Catholics and not all Muslims chose this answer to the problems posed by modernity – but some did, and in doing so they made an active choice for which they can, and should, be held morally responsible. Some theorists, such as Terry Eagleton, have attempted to defend “the myths of oppressed people” from critiques which “are bound to be launched from an aridly intellectualist viewpoint” (190-91). While Eagleton does not defend antisemitism, his argument could be used to mount such a defense. Similarly, John Calvert writes: “Following Eagleton, we may regard Qutb’s budding Islamism as providing Egyptians with a motivating ideology for battling the forces [Jews and Westerners] that many blamed for the sad condition of Muslims in modern times.” I vehemently disagree with both views, and believe that critiquing such myths is salutary and important even, or precisely, if it comes from an “intellectualist viewpoint” (171). Moreover, I am not attempting to provide a general model for the interaction between modernizing religious movements and antisemitic ideology, which holds true regardless of time and place. Indeed, as Calvert writes, there was nothing inevitable or predetermined about the Jews (rather than say the Copts or the Freemasons) becoming the key target of Sayyid Qutb’s ire (167). The specific target, as in the Polish case, was dependent on contextual factors. However, I do believe that juxtaposing the Egyptian Muslim and Polish Catholic routes to antisemitism can help us see a particular dynamic which was present in both cases, and which is less visible if either case is studied in isolation. While these findings may not be enough to “explain” antisemitism in either Poland or Egypt, I hope that they can shed some new light on each case and, hopefully, point

towards the need for further empirical research to follow up on the arguments presented in this paper.

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