



THEO-WEB

Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik

Academic Journal of Religious Education

18. Jahrgang 2019, Heft 1

ISSN 1863-0502

Thema: „ Antisemitism as a Challenge for Religious Education. International and Interdisciplinary perspectives“

Lange, A. (2019). The Religious Memory of Antisemitism –The Pittsburgh Shooter between Christian White Supremacist and Islamicist Agitation. *Theo-Web*, 18(1), 6–17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23770/tw00xy>



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The Religious Memory of Antisemitism – The Pittsburgh Shooter between Christian White Supremacist and Islamicist Agitation

by
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Abstract

Based on the example of the Pittsburgh shooting at October 27th 2018, this article argues that antisemitism is based on a set of religious symbols which began to evolve in antiquity and which incite people to violent acts of hatred against Jews. The religious symbols of antisemitism are anchored in the religious and cultural memories of the Western und Muslim worlds. Eradication of antisemitism will only be possible, if these religious symbols of Antisemitism are neutralized in both heritages.

Keywords: Pittsburgh shooting, Antisemitism

In the morning of October 27th, Robert Bowers entered Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue during Sabbath service. He shouted "all Jews must die" ¹ and shot seventeen people. Eleven of his victims died and six were wounded. Bowers' internet presence gives a dismal impression of what motivated him to commit this most horrendous antisemitic crime in recent American history. In this article, I would like

1) to trace a specific aspect of Robert Bowers' internet presence, i.e. his religiously based antisemitic canards, and...

2) to show how Bowers is influenced in the use of these religiously based antisemitic canards by both Christian White Supremacist and Islamicist agitation. This interreligious milieu of antisemitic hate raises the questions...

3) as to how it is possible that stereotypes of Antisemitism can be communicated freely between antisemitic religious groups that are hostile to each other and 4) as to how this interreligious spread of Antisemitism can be counteracted.

1 Robert Bowers and some religious antisemitic canards in his online presence

An hour before the Pittsburgh shooting, Bowers posted on his Gab account:

¹ (<https://heavy.com/news/2018/10/robert-bowers/> [last accessed on 05/20/2019])



Fig. 1: Bowers's posting on the social network Gab.

His account was later deleted. (<https://heavy.com/news/2018/10/robert-bowers/> [last accessed on 05/20/2019]).

HIAS is the *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society*, which supports refugees of all nationalities, religions, and ethnic origins. It works with people whose lives and freedom are at risk due to war, persecution, or violence. According to an affidavit, Bowers told the police that “he wanted all Jews to die and also that they [Jews] were committing genocide to his people.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/gab-robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shootings.html?action=click&module=MoreInSection&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer&contentCollection=U.S> [last access : 05/20/2019])

There can hence be no doubt that Bowers is an antisemite of the worst kind. His violent antisemitism is clearly driven by conspiracy theories that have nothing to do with the reality of Jewish life. The Jews whom he shot and of whom he claims that they wanted to commit genocide of white Americans were between 54 and 97 years old.

Obviously Bowers' judeophobic fantasies are not related in any way to the congregants of the Tree of Life Synagogue. How could Rose Mallinger – being 97 years old – have plotted genocide against white America? How could have Melvin Wax or Bernice Simon and her husband Sylvan Simon done so at age 88, 84, and 86 respectively.

Bowers favored the social media platform Gab. In the days before his hate crime, he made many posting on Gab. Since his Gab account was closed only fragments remain that can still be analyzed. Much of his internet postings were inspired by anti-immigrant polemics, which merged in a strange way with antisemitic conspiracy theories.² Some of Bowers' Gab-contents are explicitly religious in character. A note to the bio on Bowers' Gab landing page read for instance: “jews are the children of satan. (john 8:44)--- the lord jesus christ is come in the flesh.”

² For a detailed analysis of those contents of Bowers' Gab page that are not explicitly religious, see the article by Amend, A. (2018) on the Southern Poverty Law Center's Hatewatch blog. The postings of Bowers discussed in this article, were grafted from <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab>; <https://heavy.com/news/2018/10/robert-bowers-social-media-rob-gab/> [both last accessed 05/20/2019].

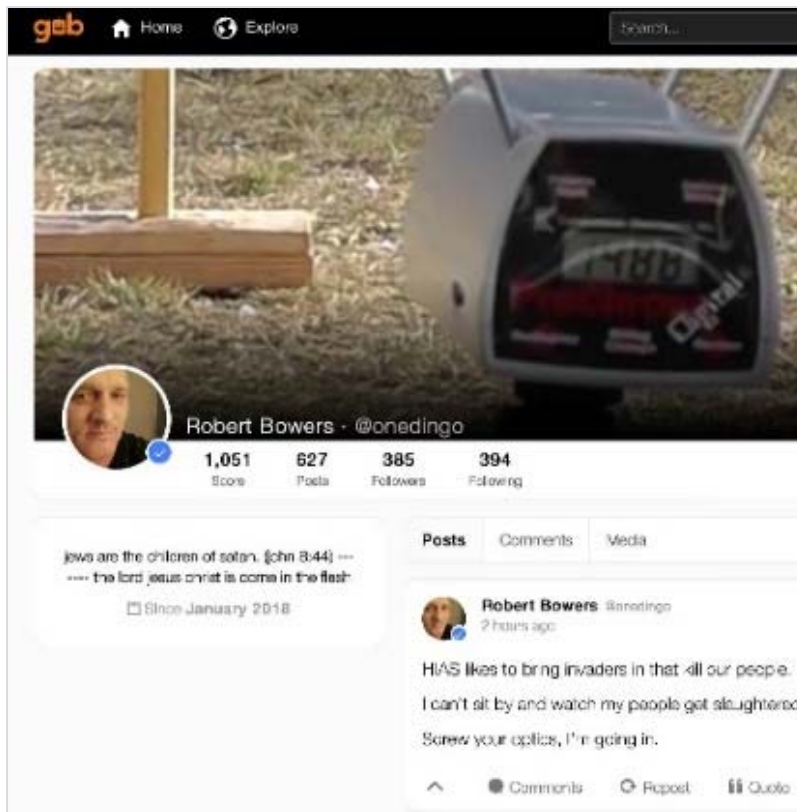


Fig. 2: Bower's landing page on Gab. The remainder of Bowers' internet presence is archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20181027160428/https://imgur.com/a/cwB9QkR> [last access: 05/20/2019].

Among Bowers' most horrendous contents is a reposting, in which he claims that decapitations of ISIS have been performed by Jews committing ritual murder of Christians. Bowers received this posting from a neo-Nazi who dubs himself "Farmer General" but the exact same posting can be found in an Islamicist powerpoint presentation by Sayyid Mansoob Hassan.

(<https://de.slideshare.net/SayyidHasan/isis-the-hidden-truth> (slide 33) [last accessed 05/20/2019]). In the below depictions of both postings, I have erased the photos showing the decapitation itself from both postings out of respect for the dignity of its victim and because of its very graphic content:

Bowers' reposting

Sayyid Mansoob Hassan's powerpoint

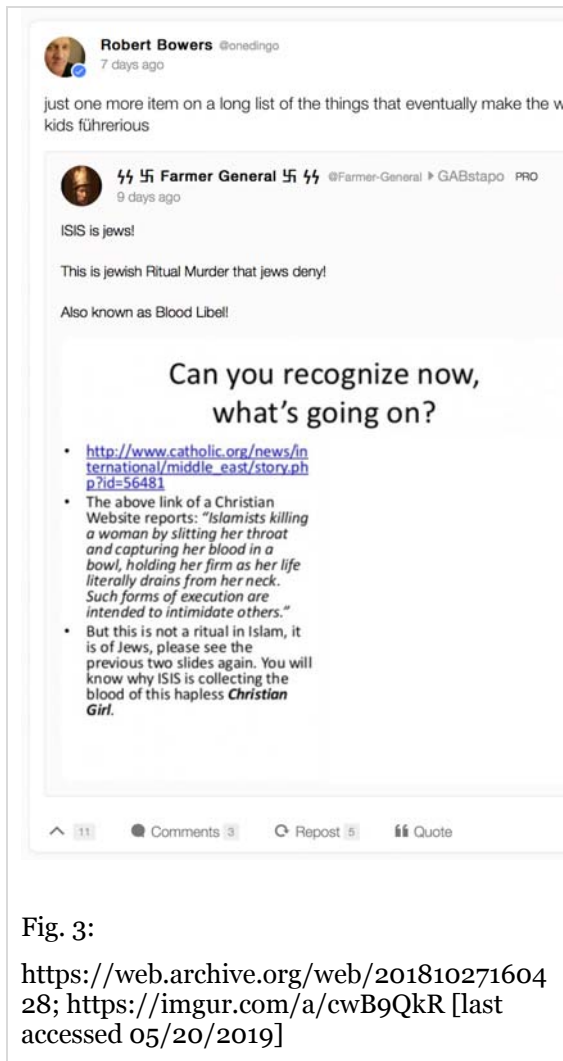


Fig. 3:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181027160428>; <https://imgur.com/a/cwB9QkR> [last accessed 05/20/2019]

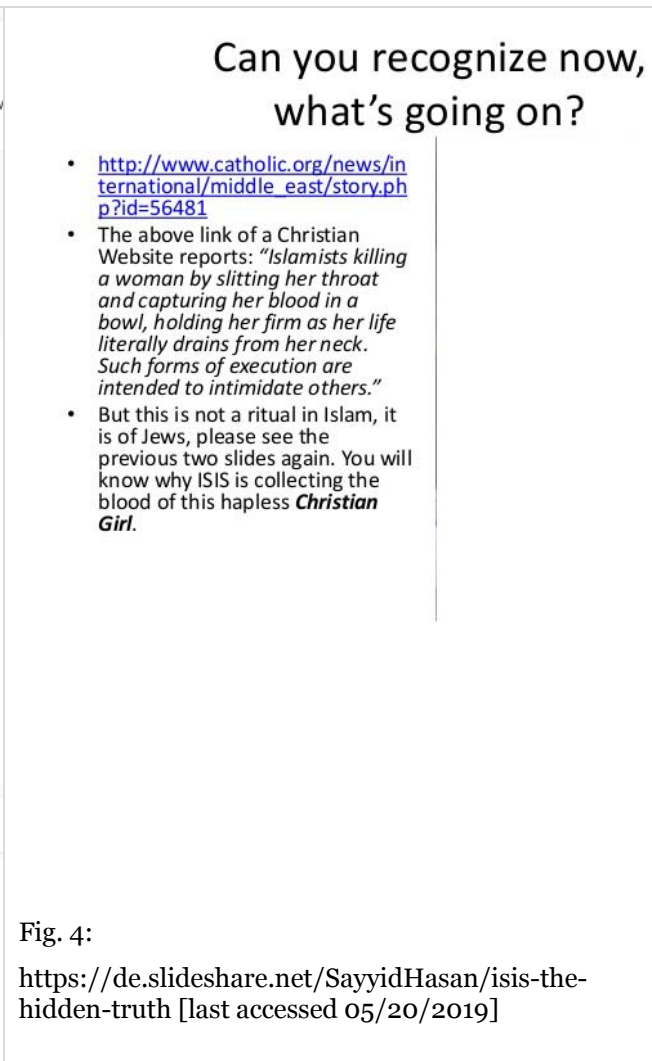


Fig. 4:

<https://de.slideshare.net/SayyidHasan/isis-the-hidden-truth> [last accessed 05/20/2019]

Already Bowers' reposting leaves no doubt that Bowers is far from alone in his convictions. As stated above, the original source for Bowers' horrific reposting about ISIS decapitations as Jewish ritual murders comes from a powerpoint presentation by Sayyid Mansoob Hasan. Sayyid Mansoob Hassan is the Vice President of the Pakistan *Institute of Public Finance Accountants*. Hasan's powerpoint presentation is called "ISIS – The Hidden Truth" and was published on slideshare at July 10th 2015 (<https://de.slideshare.net/SayyidHasan/isis-the-hidden-truth> [last access: 05/20/2019]).³ Both Bowers's posting and Hasan's Powerpoint slide have the exact same design and the exact same text. That both postings emphasize "Christian website" as the origin of the horrific photos, points for the original posting to an author that does not identify with Christianity. The original author furthermore attempts to defend ISIS against accusations for decapitations by stating "But this is not a ritual in Islam, it is of Jews (...). You will know why ISIS is collecting the blood of this hapless *Christian Girl*." The phrase the "previous two slides" refers to two powerpoint slides in Hassan's

³ Without insinuating ritual murder and in other designs, the caption and picture can also be found at <https://liveencounters.net/archives-contributors-2/breaking-news/beheading-and-crucifixion-of-christians-by-islamists-in-iraq/>; <https://prezi.com/mpl49o36ttnx/untitled-prezi/> and various other mostly radical right-wing sites. I could not locate the putative original posting on catholic.org. All URL's were last accessed on 05/20/2019.

powerpoint presentation that depict two ritual murders and blood libel slanders against Jews. Given all this evidence and given that Mansoob Hassan posted his powerpoint slides as early as 2015, i.e. three years before Bowers' reposting, there can be no doubt that Bowers' reposting draws ultimately on Islamicist antisemitic propaganda.

What is important for my question is that Bowers clearly believes in a large collection of antisemitic stereotypes holding them to be unquestionable truths. Alongside various conspiracy theories, both the demonization of Jews as children of the devil and the blood libel are part of Bowers' antisemitic beliefs. There can furthermore be no doubt, that in the end Bowers' antisemitic belief system incited him to kill eleven Jews and wound six more during the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

2 Christian and Islamic background of Bower's antisemitic religious ideas

Given Bowers' white supremacist background, it is more than ironic that some of his antisemitic religious ideas converge with those whom he despises most after Jews, Islamicist Muslims, and that at least one of his religious slanders was ultimately inspired by an Islamicist.

In the world of Islam, both the diabolization of Jews and the ritual murder slander are widespread. An example is a sermon that Sheikh Khaled al-Mughrabi held in 2015 at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. In this sermon, al-Mughrabi attacked Jews repeatedly for worshiping the devil and for ritual murders of Christian children (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=34&v=PJyuTQ9kNCY; http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=14988 [last access: 05/20/2019]):⁴

“The Children of Israel had the holiday of Pesach, what is now called Passover. Every holiday, every group would look for a small child, kidnap and steal him, bring a barrel called the barrel of nails and his body would be pierced by these nails. In the bottom of the barrel they would put a faucet and pour the blood. The Devil or one of the big gods, demanded it of them as a condition for fulfilling their wishes, they eat [matzah] bread kneaded with the blood of the children. On the holiday of Passover it is forbidden for the to eat regular bread. They prepare their matzahs. These matzahs were not kneaded in the regular way, but rather with the blood of children. When these stories were exposed, the Children of Israel were expelled from all of Europe and the tragedy of the Children of Israel began in all Europe. In the end it reached the point where they were burned in Germany, because of these things, because the kidnapped young children. These stories are known. There is proof of them. They are in court files. There were a lot of trials against the Children of Israel in these matters. You can see a long list of these stories. Even though there is a news blackout about them, they are on the Internet. Write: ‘Jews’ bread’ on Google, ‘Jews’ bread’ or ‘Jews’ matzah’. You will see all of these stories, and for all of them there is proof and evidence, with dates and police files in which the material is found (...) The Freemason lodges are witchcraft gatherings of the Children of Israel. One of the ceremonies, for instance If someone wants to be

4. In another sermon al-Mughrabi argued: “The things we see in the story of Adam [in the Quran] are the key to interpret the story of the Children of Israel (...) In the story of Adam, the Children of Israel are parallel to the Devil [Iblis] in Heaven. The Children of Israel symbolize the Devil in Heaven” (http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=763&fld_id=763&doc_id=15074 [last access: 05/20/2019]).

accepted as a new member, or rise in rank he has to somehow bring one of his sons or daughters, or his wife or one of his male or female relatives, and put them on the table and slaughter them with his own hands as a sacrifice to Satan, in order to rise in the ranks of the Freemasons. My brothers, this exists until today.”

Sermons like the one by al-Mughrabi are a form of hate preaching that incites the Muslim population of Israel and the Palestinian territories to as much if not more antisemitic violence as did the Pakistani ritual murder slander that reached Robert Bowers via the posting of a fellow American neo-Nazi.

How is it possible that an American antisemite of Christian background and a Muslim hate preacher in Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa mosque employ the same antisemitic symbols to agitate against Jews? How is it possible that an US-American Christian white supremacist mass murderer of Jews was indirectly inspired by the antisemitic agitation of a Pakistani Islamicist?

To answer these questions, I am drawing on the results of the conference “An End to Antisemitism!” held in February 2018 at the University of Vienna. One of the most important results of this conference is to understand antisemitism as both a unique cultural and a unique religious category (Lange, Muzicant, Porat, Schiffman & Weitzman, 2018; Lange, Mayerhofer & Schiffman, 2019; Lange & Grossman, 2019). The stereotypes of antisemitic agitation function as religious symbols that express and transmit a belief system of Jew-hatred (Geertz, 1966, p. 4). The antisemitic religious symbols of that belief system are part of the cultural and religious memories of the Western and Muslim worlds. My examples of Robert Bowers, Sayyid Mansoob Hassan, and Khaled Al-Mughrabi already demonstrate that anti-Semitic religious symbols are both transcultural and transreligious, migrating freely between Christian, Muslim, and other religious symbolic systems.

A few examples of how the religious symbols of the demonization of the Jews and of ritual murder and blood libel are part of both Western and Muslim religious memories and are anchored thus both deeply in these religious heritages will illustrate my point.

The diabolization of Jews as the children of the devil is very prominent in Christian heritage as already illustrated by John 8:44. I do not want to discuss the original meaning of John 8:44 itself, i.e. the verse Bowers referred to on his Gab page, but to point the attention of the reader only to its horrendous reception history.

Already in early second century C.E., the *Letter of Barnabas* claims that Jews would be ruled by the angels of Satan (*Let. Bar.* 18:1). In the 13th century C.E., a caricature in the Forest Roll of Essex depicts a certain Aaron as the son of the devil (Jacobs, 1896, p. 225.231–233).



Fig. 5: 1277 Forest Eyre roll, TNA/E32/12, rot. 3d; Caption: Jacobs, 1896, p. 225.

These are just a few of a long list of examples for the diabolization of Jews beginning in the 3rd century B.C.E. and ending today (cf. e.g. Lange & Grossman, 2019).

Similarly, in Islam, the Quran accuses the Jews of Medina (translation according to Al-Hilālī & Ḥān, 1997, p. 748):

Shaitan (Satan) has overpowered them. So he has made them forget the remembrance of Allah. They are the party of *Shaitan* (Satan). Verily, it is the party of *Shaitan* (Satan) that will be the losers! (Quran, Sura 58:19)

Despite the Quranic verse, the diabolization of Jews is rarer in Islam than in Christianity but far from absent. Al Tabari (d. 923 C.E.) reports e.g. in the early 10th century how the Abbasid Califs al-Mutawwakil and al-Muqtadir had issued edicts in the years 850 and 907–908 C.E. respectively that Jews would have to mark their doors with depictions of the devil: “He commanded that wooden images of devils be nailed to the doors of their homes to distinguish them from the homes of the Muslims.” (quoted according to Bostom, 2008, p. 653; cf. Yeor, 1985, p. 186; Gil, 1992, p. 159 n. 32).

Ritual murder accusations were very prominent in medieval Christianity as illustrated by the below painting of the purported ritual murder of William of Norwich in 1144 from the Holy Trinity Church in Loddon, Norfolk:



Fig. 6: The crucifixion of William of Norwich;
Holy Trinity Church, Loddon, Norfolk
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_libel#/media/File:Death_of_William_of_Norwich.jpg [last access: 05/20/2019].)

Even in 2017, bishop Tikhon Shevkunov, the confessor of President Vladimir Putin, accused Jews to have ritually murdered czar Nikolaus II and senior investigator Justice Marina Molodtslova headed an official Russian investigation into this supposed ritual murder.⁵ Since medieval times, the ritual murder slander was combined with the false allegation that Jews would use the blood of their victims to create matzot.

In 1840, the ritual murder slander entered the Muslim world with the so-called Damascus Affair (Frankel, 1997). The Jews of Damascus were wrongly accused by French diplomat Ulysse de Ratti-Menton to have ritually murdered Padre Tommaso da Calangianus and his servant Ibrahim Amara. What ensued was an outright persecution of the city's Jews that only ended years later due to prolonged international pressure.

The example of the Damascus Affair demonstrates the ease of transreligious communicability of antisemitic stereotypes. Since the Damascus Affair, the ritual murder slander became a standard stereotype in Muslim antisemitic agitation. For instance, in 1983, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass published a book called the *Matzoh of Zion* in which re-affirmed the ritual murder slander in the Arab world (Tlas, 1986).

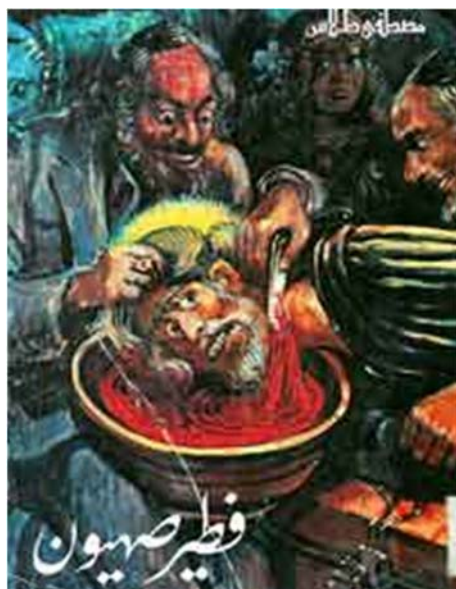


Fig. 7: Cover of *The Matzoh of Zion* (image: mrmichaelstuart.com via <https://www.memri.org/reports/mustafa-tlass-blood-libel-matzah-of-zion> [last access: 05/20/2019])

Today the ritual murder slander is often combined with the diabolization of the Jews. An example for such a combination of the diabolization of Jews and the blood libel is the below caricature of Israeli prime minister Netanyahu.

⁵ Senior investigator justice Marina Molodtslova began her investigation in 2015. She stated: “Since the investigation was resumed, more than 20 witnesses have been questioned, and the places where the remains were found have been examined. In addition, a psychological and historical test will be conducted to find out if it could have been a ritual killing” (Tass.com, November 27th, 2017). Similarly bishop Tikhon Shevkunov, the confessor of President Wladimir Putin commented: “We’re treating the ritualistic murder version in the most serious way. Furthermore, a considerable part of the Church commission has no doubts it was exactly that type of killing” (Tass.com, November 28th, 2017). All quotes taken from <https://www.memri.org/reports/russias-federal-investigators-consider-antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-tsar-nicholas-ii> [last access: 05/20/2019].



Fig. 8: “Satanyahu”.
Image: <https://mikereport.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/odehsatan.jpg> [last accessed 05/20/2019]

3 Cultural memory and religious Jew-Hatred

I hope my examples have shown that the two antisemitic canards shared by Christian white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Muslim Jew-haters – radically different as they are – are two antisemitic religious symbols. These and other ideas of antisemites about Jews are irrational and full of religious fervor. Ancient and late ancient antisemitism, as well medieval, modern, and contemporary antisemitism can thus be described as a religious symbol system that is united not by a positive confession but by a negative one. One line in the creed of antisemitism is the confession that “the Jews are the sons of the Devil” another one that they commit ritual murder. Ancient and late ancient as well as medieval and modern antisemitism can thus be described as a negative religion.

In tracing the religious symbols of the Jews as the children of the devil and of Jewish ritual murder, I hope to have shown that the religion of antisemitism is not monolithic. The religious symbols of the bedevilment of the Jews and of ritual murder were transmitted in different religious traditions and across religious borders. Christian white supremacist Jew-haters and Islamicist Jew-haters are united by a shared religious symbol system of hate. This shared religious symbol system enables the cross-cultural communication of individual religious antisemitic canards even across the border of the hate that Christian white supremacists feel for their Islamicist counterparts.

Antisemites of different religious and cultural backgrounds thus draw on a system of negative religious symbols to perceive the Jewish other. In their irrational fervor, they do not question this overcome prejudiced lore but apply it to the Jewish other with unshattered conviction. The roots of this system of religious symbols are very old. It was and is transmitted through the cultural and religious memories of the western and Muslim worlds. Early Christianity and early Islam integrated antisemitic religious thought into their religious symbolic systems. Both Christianity and Islam have preserved antisemitic prejudice in their religious memories ever since, turning it into “the longest hatred” (Wistrich, 1991).

Crisis situations of various natures are catalysts which make the religious symbol system of antisemitism convincing to people outside the core group of antisemitic believers thus creating new antisemites. These crises can be of various nature but

often result in an identity crisis of the antisemitic believer. New and old antisemites employ the religious symbolic system of antisemitism to understand not only the Jewish other but more important to understand situations of crises which seem to devalue themselves.

My examples are thus also united by their identity building by applying the religious symbols of bedeviling the Jews and ritual murder not only to the Jewish other but to the cognition of their own reality as such. Whether neo-Nazi, Muslim or Islamicist anti-Zionist, Christian white supremacist or any other type of antisemite, my examples show that antisemites draw on a shared religious memory uniting these diverse groups that are often even hostile towards each other.

In the case of Robert Bowers, the antisemitic hatred evoked by these age old religious symbols ignited a violent rage of hatred that led Bowers to mass murder the congregants of Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagoge. The Pittsburgh shooting leaves thus no doubt that antisemitic religious symbols are powerful emotional motivators that incite to antisemitic violence.

4 Fighting transreligious Jew-Hatred

The case of Robert Bowers thus shows that in a vicious circle, the cultural and religious memories reaffirm existing Jew-hatred or create new Jew-hatred in each generation. The fight against antisemitism can only be successful if each generation is immunized anew against the antisemitic stereotypes in our cultural and religious memories and if as many antisemitic stereotypes as possible can be removed from their memory spaces.

Based on my above observations and the research conducted at the conference "An End to Antisemitism!" I would therefore like to propose the following policies to fight religiously motivated antisemitism (cf. Lange, Muzicant, Porat, Schiffman & Weitzman, 2018; Lange, Mayerhofer, Porat & Schiffman, 2019):

- Existing antisemitic stereotypes and symbols need to be eradicated from the cultural and religious memories of the world. They should be identified as antisemitic and not be allowed to generate new antisemitic contents. For this purpose, whenever possible,
 - antisemitic contents should be taken out of circulation both off – and online.
 - antisemitic contents in social and other media should be suppressed and/or removed.
 - antisemitic contents that cannot be removed from the cultural or religious memories of the world should be accompanied by glosses and commentaries warning about their antisemitic nature.
- Positive contents about Judaism in the cultural and religious memories of the world should be emphasized and/or added both off - and online. For this purpose,
 - Jewish achievements for a given society or country should be highlighted by memorials celebrating Jewish contributions to the world's heritage.
 - Existing and new books and documentaries of high quality about Judaism should be translated in as many languages as possible and distributed in an affordable way or free of charge both off - and online.

- The history of antisemitism should be depicted accurately in the cultural and religious memories of the world, and inaccurate depictions should be corrected whenever possible.
 - Existing and new books and documentaries of high quality about the history of antisemitism from its ancient beginnings until today should be translated into as many languages as possible and distributed in an affordable way or free of charge both off - and online.
 - The voices of all victims of antisemitism from antiquity until today need to be heard and made visible both off - and online. To this end, online databases should be created.
 - In addition to Holocaust memorial days, the victims of antisemitic persecutions should be recognized by special commemorations in the countries where these persecutions took place.
 - Museums, documentaries, etc. should focus not only on the Shoah but should address other instances of antisemitic violence as well.

- Holocaust education needs to be accompanied by other educational strategies that communicate a wider historical sense of the horrors of antisemitism as well as an understanding of the contribution of the Jewish people to many areas of modern culture and civilization.
 - Schools need to teach the history, culture, and religion of Judaism on all levels from pre-school to universities and continuing education.
 - Schools need to teach the history of antisemitism from its ancient beginnings until today from the earliest educational level advisable up to universities and continuing education.

- In the context of education and elsewhere, the irrational, religious nature of antisemitic hatred makes it impossible to fight antisemitism with rational arguments alone. They need to be accompanied by emotional experiences that can be both religious and secular. Education on all levels should thus include emotional experiences with Judaism and practical encounters with Jewish people.

- Exposure to living Judaism is crucial beyond education. Especially decision makers and influencers should be exposed to Jewish culture and religion as well as to practical experiences with Judaism both in Israel and abroad. For that purpose, it is recommended that
 - Religious groups and organizations should participate in interfaith activities ranging from discussion groups and committees to interfaith prayers.
 - Cooperation with Israeli and other Jewish religious, cultural, academic, educational, business, and political organizations, groups, institutions, and companies should be encouraged.

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