Thoughts On French And Catholic Anti-Semitism

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Résumé

Le but de cet article est de commenter brièvement les points de vue soulignées dans deux articles presentés pendant la réunion de l'Association Historique Canadienne et de la Societé Historique des Juifs Canadiens.

Dans le premier article on fait relever l'importance de connaître à fond les rélations entre la France et le Québec avant d'essayer d'interpréter la position des Canadiens-Français vis-à-vis des Juifs dans la province de Québec. Il semble, en effet, que les Canadiens-Français étaient opposés à tout ce qui venait de l'extérieur du Québec. D'autre part on fait relever aussi la position prise par les Juifs pour ce qui concerne les catholiques de la région et le désir de la part des Juifs de s'identifier davantage à l'élite anglophone.

Dans l'autre article il s'agit du developpement de la question scolaire et de l'importance de l'interaction entre Catholiques et Protestants pour empêcher l'épanouissement des droits des Juifs.

L'investigation historique du rôle joué par les Juifs au Canada doit ainsi être conduite sur une base très rigoureuse et très scientifique. Il en suit que l'historien a encore beaucoup à découvrir.

The purpose of this paper is to comment briefly on interpretations and viewpoints advanced by Michael Brown* in "France, the Catholic Church, French Canadians and Jews before 1914" and by David Rome in "The Political Consequences of the Jewish School Question." These papers were read at a joint session of the Canadian Historical Association and the Jewish Historical Society of Canada held at Laval University in June 1976. Although one paper was more general in its purview and tended to consider the French influence more than the Canadian, while the other focused on the Jewish School Question on the island of Montreal in the 1920's, there were sufficient common elements to justify considering them together.

*We regret that Dr. Michael Brown's paper was not available for publication.

Professor Brown's thesis may be reduced to the affirmation that France since the Revolution has been generally unfriendly, not to say outrightly hostile, to the Jews, while French Canada has been even less friendly and more overtly anti-Semitic. Catholicism is seen as a key factor in both cases. Mr. Rome's paper, on the other hand, takes a specific social issue — the Jewish School question on the island of Montreal in the 1920's— to demonstrate deep-seated anti-Semitism, especially in the Catholic School Commission and the Catholic hierarchy. It provides an excellent introduction to the very complex Jewish school question. But the interesting hypothesis that the school question had an important impact on the political future of the Taschereau government is never adequately documented or fully developed. Both papers are alike insofar as they do not convincingly document the precise role and responsibility of Catholic thought and Catholic leadership in the events they review.

The attempt to link and to find common origins for the anti-Semitism of post-Revolutionary France and of Quebec is a challenging approach. To sustain such an interpretation, evidence is required that all which passes for anti-Semitism is necessarily *only* anti-Semitism and not part of a much broader xenophobia or ethnocentrism. It may not be difficult to document that republican France and ultramontane Quebec were particularly inhospitable milieux for the Jewish communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but such "proof" does not of itself confirm that the *manque d'accueil*, suspicion, isolation, and subtle discrimination were attributable, in the main, to a culture which was marked by its Frenchness and Catholicism. In fact, France and Quebec were remarkably different francophone cultures at the time.

It is necessary to know what the precise relationships between France and Quebec were in the 19th century and early 20th century, how these evolved or developed in very different Western European and North American contexts, and how these may have provided a common bond of anti-Semitism. Were there direct political, religious and cultural ties between the Canadian province and modern France which would nourish a common view and policy vis-à-vis the Jewish minority? The fact that both communities demonstrated no particular enthusiasm for Jews does not in itself constitute evidence that they did so in concert, much less for necessarily the same reasons. Perhaps the difficulties Jews experienced at Trois Rivières or Montreal in the mid-19th century were more closely linked to the problems their community faced in Vancouver Island at the time!

Secondly, it is necessary to obtain evidence that the Jewish community in Montreal maintained close contact with the community in France. Was there any significant sense of a universal francophone Jewish community? It is important to know how the Jewish community in Montreal saw itself and how it saw French Canada because its own world view could be the major factor in accounting for its experience in Quebec. Did the problems confronting the small Jewish community in France — the Dreyfus case, for example — have direct repercussions in Quebec? Professor Brown demonstrated that *La Presse* and *La Patrie* propagated an anti-Dreyfusard attitude. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between causative factors and what were simply reinforcing elements in the exercise of that, might be described as Québécois going on believing what they wanted to believe. Furthermore, I am not convinced that there is much direct relationship between attitudes in France and in Quebec, at least in a direct and causative sense. Problems in Quebec, such as the school question, did not have their roots in France. It is necessary to work out clearly the relationship between French anti-Semitism and French-Canadian anti-Semitism. If most French Canadians mistrusted France for its republicanism and anti-clericalism then it is difficult to assume a community of ideas in the francophone world.

Thirdly, is it correct to regard the Catholic component of the French Canadian ethno-cultural community or "nation" as the causative factor in anti-Semitism? French Canadians were equally unreceptive to francophone Protestants. Also, did not francophone Catholic immigrants, not to speak of anglophone Irish Catholics, find that French Canada was virtually a closed society into which integration was exceedingly difficult? In other words, there existed a certain xenophobia, or *nationalisme* bordering on racism in 19th century Quebec which was reinforced by Ultramontane Catholicism. It is by no means established that this xenophobia had a preliminary anti-Jewish impetus. French Jews were regarded in much the same light as were French Protestants, French freethinkers, and even the majority of European francophone Catholics. I have come across more than one directive that warned Québécois of the dangers implicit in European francophone immigration.

Fourthly, one must ask how virulent was Jewish anti-Catholicism? While it is possible to place incidents end-to-end, so to speak, to create a continuing current of anti-Semitism in Quebec, it is also possible to create or identify an undercurrent of anti-Catholicism in the Jewish community. The papers presented at the joint session have elements of interpretation

which might be construed as being in such a tradition. The pilgrimage literature, for example, which Professor Brown utilizes to illustrate his hypothesis can be interpreted otherwise than as anti-Semitic in motivation. The few passages which might be construed as being anti-Semitic are no more frequent or virulent than are passages which are anti-Protestant, anti-Orthodox, anti-Muslim, anti-freethinker, anti-non-practising Catholic. The pilgrimage literature reflects the prejudices, moral assumptions and values of its authors, but it was not written to promote anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitic element is so negligible as to pass unnoticed by most readers. It was meant to promote Catholic piety, and that is what it seems to have accomplished primarily. The Jewish community, with the memory of centuries of prejudicial discrimination and persecution in Europe, was sensitive to any attack, whatever the motivation for such negative statements. What does come through in Professor Brown's paper is the anti-Catholic stance of the Jewish community. Why should the anglophone Protestant community have been regarded by the francophone Jews as "closer" than the francophone host society? Perhaps this is an assumption about the Jewish community in the 1910's that reveals more about present-day interpretations and feelings than it does about the social climate of the second decade of this century in Montreal. There is evidence that the Protestants were no less anti-Semitic in Montreal, especially in the 1910's, than were the Catholics. Also, there is little evidence to suggest that at that time the Jewish and Protestant communities saw each other as minorities having a number of qualities in common.

Fifthly, there remains the crucial question concerning the effort on the part of the Jewish community to recognize the French character of Quebec. It is significant that English was employed in the Montreal-Paris correspondence of the Jewish Colonization Association. If there was more affinity felt for the anglophone community, one cannot assume, or take as proven, that this was largely because of French-Canadian anti-Semitism. Several other explanations are possible and these would each have to be documented and evaluated before arriving at any tentative conclusion. The influence of the Jewish anglophone community, which surpassed the Jewish francophone community in numbers, wealth, institutional strength and North American contacts, must be taken into account. In addition to the character or nature of North American Jewry, one must investigate the possibility of a conscious or subconscious desire to identify with the dominant élite in Montreal. Why was it easier to maintain the fran-

cophone character of the immigrant French community in New York than in Montreal, if indeed this was the case? Was it because there was more political interest in continental French affairs and because the "old country" French connection enjoyed more status in New York? It is suspected that these might have been important elements. If they were, then the whole argument of a French-Quebec connection, or common French front, is struck a rather severe blow.

Finally, the religious-based anti-Semitic strain in Western European culture should not be labelled as peculiarly or especially Catholic. It is, of course, historically true that Jews for centuries were condemned from Catholic pulpits as perverse, stubborn and ungrateful because they refused to admit the divinity of Jesus Christ, as bearers of a monstrous hereditary guilt for the murder of the Nazarene. An additional dimension of this conceptual framework must be considered. Eschatological tradition has associated the Jews with Anti-Christ himself. As early as the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian era, theologians were predicting that Anti-Christ would be a Jew of the tribe of Dan, that he would be born at "Babylon", grow up in Palestine, rebuild the Temple, and bring the Jews back together from their dispersion. This old prophecy became part of European folk-belief and its role in anti-Semitic sentiment is not limited to Catholics, much less to French Catholics. It is, unfortunately, very much part of the European Christian heritage shared by Poles, Russians, Germans, English and Spaniards and shared by Lutherans, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Calvinists and Catholics.

The issue of Jewish public schooling on the island of Montreal, when seen in the ferment of francophone America, becomes more understandable. The Jewish community shared with the Quebec Catholic community a respect for learning and a conviction that education should be religiously-oriented. But there, the common ground may have ended, as Professor Rome's paper suggests. The Education Acts of 1841 and 1846 had established the dual confessional system and the British North America Act (especially clause 93 inserted at the insistence of the Protestant minority) merely undertook to guarantee what already existed. It was a typically Victorian concept of group rights, as opposed to a later concept of individual civil liberties, that found expression in the legislation of the period. The legal term "class of persons" could have included Jews if they had established their "denominational rights" prior to the "Union" of 1867. There is little doubt that the Jewish community lacked dynamic leadership, internal cohesion and unity at the time. Therefore the failure to

entrench its rights and privileges in the constitutional charter is historically understandable. A further complexity in the school question was the distinction between common schools and dissentient schools, with the cities of Montreal and Quebec each having two confessional school Commissions and hence no dissentient or minority schools. Only rural Quebec and smaller urban centres could have dissentient school Boards (syndics).

It was not until 1869 that the problem of taxation of non-Catholics and non-Protestants for school purposes was tackled. It was decided to establish a third or "neutral" panel. Legislation the following year made it clear that Jews could choose the panel to which they would pay their taxes and hence the school system their children would attend. Indeed, for a time a number of Jewish children attended the Catholic schools. However, as more children gravitated towards the Protestant system, grumblings arose there about the financial burden being placed on the Protestant community, special concessions that had to be made for Jewish children, and what was vaguely called the threat to the Christian character of the schools. The negative attitudes of many Protestants found expression in the school commission minutes, in the press, and even in sermons. In 1897, the Attorney-General warned that the Protestants were not obliged to accept Jewish children in their schools and he suggested that legally there was no obstacle to the establishment of a third public school system in the province of Quebec. The Jewish community seems to have been sharply divided on the wisdom of creating a third confessional public school system. The Protestants, on their part, were not entirely satisfied with the presence of a growing number of Jewish children in their schools. And it is precisely on this point that Professor Rome's paper must be read in the context of Protestant-Jewish relations, rather than in the context of Catholic-Jewish relations. The problems the Jewish community had with schools in the Montreal region resulted from the actions of the Protestant community and from the basic organizational system which the Protestants had insisted in 1867 should be constitutionally guaranteed and thereby perpetuated in the province. The most violent expressions of anti-Semitism during World War I will be found in the discussions of the Protestant School Commission and in the pages of the Montreal Daily Herald and the Quebec *Chronicle*. Protestants, at least since 1903, had been outspoken in their comments regarding curriculum, democratically-elected school boards, procedures for hiring and promoting teachers, etc. which Jewish parents raised as diplomatically as possible. There is no quarrel with the thesis that the Catholic community became very

implicated in the Jewish-Protestant dialogues, especially in the 1920's, and that certain attitudes vis-à-vis the Jewish community were fostered among French Canadians, notably in the Catholic hierarchy which in turn influenced its constituency. It is the comparative importance of Catholic opinion and Protestant lobbying which must be considered.

The role and influence of the Catholic hierarchy in the Jewish school question has not yet been clearly documented. To begin with, the question concerned Protestants much more than it did Catholics. Also, it still remains to be demonstrated how the school question directly and effectively conditioned later political developments in the province. The influence of Archbishop Gauthier in the question may be greatly exaggerated because there were other views expressed in the Catholic hierarchy — e.g. the position of Cardinal Rouleau must not be ignored. Precisely what the hierarchy spoke out against needs to be established; a blanket charge of anti-Semitism is rather unscholarly because an attack on what are perceived to be the rights of the established churches in education is not necessarily an attack on Jewish rights. Jewish school demands, Jewish political manoeuvres and Jewish educational philosophy might be attacked without attacking the Jewish community *per se* or even its rights to self-determination. Were Protestants and Catholics, in other words, more interested in protecting their own rights and privileges than in blocking Jewish *épanouissement?* Was the fundamental question not framed in terms of change, any change, undermining the entire educational system and its legal and constitutional underpinnings?

The link between the rightist movement of Adrien Arcand and the various anti-Semitic outbursts, including the school controversy, is an area of research deserving more investigation. It must not be imagined that the school controversy was the major issue, however, because the pattern of Jewish settlement in Montreal, its rapid growth in the 1920's, the myths surrounding Canadian Jews (e.g. their financial dominance), and the occupational profile of that community were important factors in promoting anti-Semitism. Jews may have been a scapegoat, as so often in their history, for the comparative economic lag of the French Canadian population in the development of its own province. Professor Rome's paper does attempt to bring together a number of concurrent issues and this global approach is most laudable. On the other hand, it creates as many problems of interpretation as it provides satisfactory explanations.

For example, the leap from generalizations about the Montreal school crisis to a provincial political and social arena is a very large one. There is

no doubt that increasing anti-Semitic feeling and organization, the exclusion of Jewish refugees, the enforcement of Sunday observance legislation and the school question were all linked in some way to each other and were part of a socio-cultural phenomenon. The essential task that the historian must undertake is to demonstrate how these components were related to each other. It is argued that the school controversy was at the origin of the other manifestations of what is sweepingly called (or implied to be) anti-Semitism; it can be argued that the school controversy was rendered more acrimonious because of these other issues which were brewing in the 1920's; it can be argued that they all had other common sources or origins, and so the historical hypothesis might be multiplied.

From these comments it may be concluded that historical investigation requires a very precise *problématique* at the outset, a scientifically rigorous methodology not just in research operation but especially in interpretation of the data in its global context, and a more tentative approach to conclusions than the general public expects of so-called experts. The two papers read at the joint session at Laval University made an important contribution to the study of minority rights in Canada. They dealt with subjects which many Canadians would prefer to gloss over, but which historians must be prepared to investigate methodically. Just as important, from the point of view of a professional association such as the Jewish Historical Society, is the willingness of the historian to accept the revelations of his evidence, even when some of his scholarly discoveries are not entirely reassuring to his own preconception or palatable to his reading public. It is a truism to say that we should beware of history that is painted in wide swaths of either black or white — there are many grey areas. Might it not be added that we need to examine also the kind of brush we are using?