

# Emile Zola: In Defence of the Jews

Translated by Jack Dixon (Nov. 2006)

(The following article is translated from *Pour les Juifs* by Émile Zola which was published in *Le Figaro* (Paris) on 16 May 1896. It figures in the part that Zola played in the Dreyfus Affair. In 1894 a Captain Alfred Dreyfus, an officer of the French Army serving in the War Office, was arrested and charged with passing military documents to the Germans, an offence of high treason especially after the recent Franco-Prussian war. Captain Dreyfus was convicted, publicly disgraced, and sentenced to banishment to the infamous Devil's Island. The country was split between the *dreyfusards* and the *anti-dreyfusards*, the latter group being by far the more numerous. The *dreyfusards*, notable among them being Zola, were soon convinced that Dreyfus had been set up because he was a Jew. His conviction fuelled the anti-semitic feeling already strong in France. The case went on for 12 years, and culminated in the exposure, trial and conviction of the men who were really guilty of treason, and the exoneration of Dreyfus. It seems to this writer that Zola's article is as timely today, alas, as it was 110 years ago. This year sees the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dreyfus's exoneration, thanks largely to the campaign waged by Zola.)

I have been following, with mounting surprise and disgust, the campaign that some people are trying to foment against the Jews in France. It has been going on for some years now, and to all appearances it is an abomination. By this I mean a thing devoid of all sense, of all truth and justice; a thing of such blind stupidity as to take us back centuries, only to culminate in the worst of atrocities, a religious persecution.

To begin with, what is the charge against the Jews? What are they reproached with? Some people, including even friends of mine, say they can't stand them, they can't bear to touch their hands, without a shudder of repulsion. It is a physical aversion, an aversion of one race for another, of white for yellow or red for black.

I am not going to bother to look for the source of this repugnance in some long-felt outrage of the Christian toward the Jews who crucified his God, in a feeling of contempt and anger which goes back some centuries. The physical horror they feel is a good reason, the only real reason, since there is no answer to people who tell you: "I despise them because I despise them; because the mere sight of their noses drives me up the wall; the very thought of our differences and contrasts makes my flesh creep."

This so-called reason of racial hostility is not good enough. We might as well go back to the jungle and rekindle the barbaric wars between the species, and feed on each other for the simple reason that we don't make the same sounds or have different hair-lines.

The whole thrust of civilization is precisely that of suppressing the urge to attack one's fellow, when he is not exactly alike. Throughout the centuries the history of peoples teaches the lesson of mutual tolerance, to the end of realizing the dream of leading them to a universal fraternity, of submerging all our differences in a common respect, of sparing our people the fate of sharing a common anguish. Now, in our own day, the hatred and injury we inflict on each other, for the simple reason that our skulls are not shaped alike, is proving to be the most grotesque of follies.

I come now to the serious charge, which is of a social nature. I will sum up the case against and outline the main points. The Jews are accused of being a people apart, of living the life of a religious caste on the fringes of society; they overstep national boundaries and constitute a sort of international sect, without any real homeland, and intent on one day ruling the world.

Jews inter-marry, and foster very tight family bonds, at a time when contemporary society is adopting more relaxed customs. They sustain and encourage each other, and within their isolation show an extraordinary power of resistance and a creeping domination. Above all, they are a pragmatic and crafty people, genetically endowed with a need for spoils, a love of money, and a prodigious talent for business, and who in under a hundred years have amassed huge fortunes which bid fair to earn them the title to a kingdom in an age when money is king.

All that may be true. Yet, while acknowledging the fact, we have to account for it. There is something we must add: the Jews, as we find them today, are our own work – the work, that is, of eighteen hundred years of our mindless persecution. They have been relegated to squalid parts of our towns, like lepers, so we should not be surprised if they have lived apart, carefully preserving their traditions, tightening their family bonds, living like an oppressed people under the watchful eye of their oppressors. They have been beaten, insulted, and laden with injustice and violence, so we should not be surprised if they should harbour, even unconsciously, the hope of revenge some day, and stoke the fires of resistance and the will to survive and prevail. Above all we have contemptuously abandoned the field of commerce to them and bestowed on them the label of usurers and traffickers, so we should not be surprised if, when the rule of brute force gives way to the demands of intelligence and hard work, we should find them masters of finance, their minds fashioned by heredity over the centuries and bent on mastery of their craft.

So it is that today, we French – or rather, you anti-semites – are cowering before the consequences of

your blindness and shaking at the sight of what your mediæval sectarian creed has made of the Jews, you can think of nothing better than to hark back to the millennium, to trigger a new wave of persecutions, to preach a new holy crusade against the Jews until, hunted down, dispossessed and ghettoized, we find once again seething with a renewed hatred, and reduced to the status of serfs amidst their masters.

What fine, intelligent people you are, to be sure, and what an enlightened idea of society you have!

So now what? You number in excess of two hundred million Catholics, whereas the Jews hardly reach five million, and you shake in your shoes, you call out the police, you shriek with terror, all as if the country had suddenly been invaded by hordes of brigands! There's courage for you!

For my part, I would accept the conditions of the contest. In the realm of business, why should we not be just as intelligent and strong as them? I visited the stock exchange for a month to find out what was going on there and a Catholic banker said to me, with reference to the Jews: "Ah! They are smarter than us, they will outdo us every time." If that were true it really would be humiliating. But why should we accept it? Whatever gifts one is born with, hard work and intelligence can prevail.

I know a number of Christians who are distinguished Jews. The field is open. And if the Jews have had centuries to cultivate their love of money and to learn how to make it, all we have to do is to take a page out of their book, to adopt their habits, and to turn their own weapons against them.

For God's sake! Let's put an end to the insults: it's useless. Let's beat them by learning the rules of the game as they play it. Nothing can be easier. And it is the law of life itself.

I can only marvel at the satisfaction and pride they must feel on hearing your miserable whining. To be such a tiny minority and yet provoke such a hostile reaction! Every morning you call down thunderbolts upon their heads, you issue a call to arms as if the city was about to be invaded! Listening to you we would have to restore the ghetto, name a new *rue des Juifs*, which you would barricade with chains in the evening. What a delightful thing it would be, this quarantine, in this great, free and open city of ours!

I can understand why they don't get worked up about it, and why they keep on beating us out in the financial markets. It's the case of the legendary arrow which returns and puts out the eye of the archer. So let's keep on rubbing their noses in the dirt, if you want to see them keep on winning!

But are you really set on their persecution? You really have the idea fixed in your mind that you can keep people under by persecuting them? Well, it's just the opposite: the only causes that have prevailed are those that have been nourished by their martyrs' blood. If we still have Jews among us, the fault is yours. They would have disappeared, or been assimilated, if you hadn't forced them to defend themselves, to huddle together, to cultivate their racial stubbornness. And to this very day you are the source of their real strength, because by over-emphasizing it you reinforce it. So you finally create the danger you dread by the fact of calling attention to its existence. By dint of threatening a bogeyman you create a real live monster. So let's have an end with your prattle. From the moment the Jew is a mere man like us he will be our brother.

The policy we have to adopt is the exact opposite. Open our arms to them, and create the social equality enshrined in our Code. Welcome the Jews and they will be assimilated and become one with us. Let us take on the qualities which they so obviously have; put an end to the race wars by intermingling the races; encourage intermarriage, and pass on to the children the task of reconciling their fathers. There alone lies the work of unity, the work of humanity and liberation.

Anti-semitism, in the countries where it has become a serious threat, is never anything other than the weapon of a political party or the consequence of a serious economic situation. But in France – where it is just not true that the Jews, as people would have us believe, hold all the reins of power and money – anti-semitism is a will-o'-the-wisp, and without any hold on the people.

All it has needed to create an illusion of action is the fervour of a few unhinged minds bent on persecuting the descendants of Judas who betrayed and crucified his God. They have hunted them down to the Rothschilds we live beside today. But this passion of theirs is so much hot air. To this I add that the need to stir up a fuss, and the mania to see oneself in print and so acquire a notable celebrity, are nothing more than a fire whose flames, mercifully, are mere stage-effects.

And to think, what a ghastly failure it has been! For all those long months, the insults, the denunciations, the abuse heaped daily on the Jews as thieves and murderers, and Christians treated as Jews when the aim is to get at them; the whole Jewish people hunted down and condemned! And for what result? Nothing but noise, ugly words, and a display of ignoble passions, but not a single deed, not one skull cracked, not a window broken anywhere!

Is it not likely that the ordinary people of France, a decent people, level-headed and honest, in resisting the daily appeals to civil war, in keeping their common-sense in the midst of the outrageous incitements and the call we hear every day for the blood of a Jew? It is no longer a priest that our morning newspaper chews up every day but a Jew – and the fattest, ripest one to be found. In any event as indigestible and unsavoury a meal in one case as in the other. And all that is left is the ugliness of the task – and the most useless, fortunately, since the man-in-the-street does not even bother to look round, leaving the rowdies to fight among themselves like devils squabbling over the souls of sinners.

The amazing thing is that these Jew-baiters claim to be carrying out a necessary and sanitary task. How wretched these people are, if they are sincere, and how I pity them! What a frightful legacy they are going to leave – a pack of blunders and lies, a caldron of blind jealousy and raging lunacy, which they add to every

day! If anyone, stirred by curiosity, tried to enter this pit of iniquity, he would recoil in horror, in the conviction that religious fanaticism and disordered minds held court together there. They will be nailed to the pillory of history, like social outcasts, whose crimes have miscarried thanks solely to the climate of mental aberration in which they have been committed.

I am constantly stupefied that this renewed fanaticism, this effort to provoke religious conflict, should have arisen in our age, in this great city of Paris of ours, amongst our decent people. All that, moreover, in an age of democracy, of universal tolerance, at a time when a swelling movement urges us on towards equality, fraternity, and justice! We are determined to pull down the barriers, to look ahead to a community of nations, to bring together assemblies of all faiths in a common embrace of preachers, in proclaiming ourselves brothers united in our distress, in striving to escape by a joint effort from the sorrows of life, and in raising an altar in the name of human compassion!

While we seek to bring peace, a handful of crazies, idiots and schemers scream at us every day: "Kill the Jews! Massacre and exterminate the Jews! Bring back the stake and the dragonnade!"

That there is, in the hands of a number of Jews, a distressing concentration of wealth cannot be denied. But the same can be said of some Catholics and Protestants. But exploiting popular resentments to further religious passions, and especially throwing Jews to the lions to make up for the claims of the dispossessed, are acts worthy of a hypocritical and lying socialism which we must denounce and refute. If, one day, a law of labour is drawn up in the name of truth and happiness, it will mark a new chapter in the story of humanity. And whether one is Jew or Christian, the reckoning will be the same for all, just as the new rights and the new duties will be the same for all too.

The unity of mankind is a goal which we must strive to believe in if we are to have the courage to live and to maintain some hope in our hearts during the striving. It is just a faint cry at the moment, but it will gradually be heard; it will grow, and be picked up by all peoples hankering after peace, justice, and truth. Let us have done with our hatreds, let us seek love in our cities and beyond the borders that keep us apart, and work towards the creation of a harmony of races united in one single family. Even if it should take a thousand years let us not lose sight of the ultimate possibility of friendship – or at least of the beginnings of an amity today, insofar as the wretchedness we see around us allows. And let the madmen and the wicked go back to the savagery of the jungle with all those who think they can serve justice with violence.,

Let Jesus say then to his faithful that he has forgiven the Jews, and that they are men!

### **A Personal Afterword**

It is to be noted that Zola dwelt only on the Jews' proclivity for making money and on their reputation for shady dealings in their financial transactions with others. He might have said that there were thousands of poor Jews in France and that there were thousands of wealthy Frenchmen who were not Jews.

What is perhaps surprising is that Zola did not touch on the incalculable contribution that Jews have made to the civilization of the countries, particularly in Europe, that have given a home to them over the centuries.

For 25 years my family and I belonged to a medical clinic in Winnipeg whose doctors were all Jewish. I used to enjoy my talks with my physician, the late Dr. Alan Klass, especially on the topic of Jewry. We agreed that the unsavoury name that the Jews had acquired among some sections of the public tended to obscure their remarkable achievements in the arts, in the sciences, in medicine, in scholarship and learning, and yes, in humour – in a word, in the intellectual and cultural life of the countries they chose to live in.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1949 was an act of the United Nations, done in recognition of the fact of the Holocaust and the validity of the resettlement of the Jews of the Diaspora to their ancestral homeland. Israel is bound to exist for all time, and Europe and North America had better recognize that incontrovertible fact and base their external policies on that recognition.

They would also be wise to exercise their diplomatic energies in persuading the Arab and other Muslim states of the region to accept the fact of the permanent existence of Israel, if they wish to avoid conflict and bloodshed for a hundred years, to their ultimate ruin and disaster.

- Jack Dixon