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Anti-Semitism on the Left

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

Readers of my blogs here and at *America* magazine will know that I am an ardent Zionist, and that I am horrified to find an increasing number of liberals dabbling not only in unjust criticism of the actions taken by Israel for her defense, but the way those same liberals dabble in the tropes of classic anti-Semitism.

Christians have a special obligation to learn about anti-Semitism and be alert to even a hint of its reappearance. There was anti-Semitism before Hitler, as there is anti-Semitism after Hitler. Pogroms in Poland and Russia happened long before Arab countries expelled Jews. Dreyfuss was sent to Devil's Island because of the anti-Semitic manipulations of French Catholics. Edgardo Mortara was kidnapped from his parents by the Pope's police. For every "righteous Gentile" honored for their efforts to save Jewish lives during the Shoah, there were hundreds of Christians who went about their business, even if their business entailed participation in the mass extermination of people who had been their neighbors the day before. If you look at the history of Christian treatment of Jews and do not feel a profound sense of shame, you are not really looking.

Earlier this week, Leon Wieseltier at the *New Republic* went after Andrew Sullivan for dabbling in the kind of anti-Semitic tropes that an intellectual should know better than to dabble in. Sullivan, who now runs a blog at *The Atlantic*, says the charge of anti-Semitism is false and accuses Wieseltier of a personal vendetta.

I have no reason to believe that Sullivan hates Jews. Quite the contrary. But, I do find "and have always found" Sullivan's writing on all intellectual issues to be a bit superficial. Andrew's intellectual style still bears the mark of his time as head of the *Oxford Union*: In every discussion, his goal is not the truth, but to win on points, and winning on points never takes any deep learning. Even back in the 1980s when I first met Sullivan, I found his invocations of Aquinas jarring, citations used a proof texts the way

fundamentalist Christian cite the Bible, never reflecting anything like a profound understanding of natural law, or how it is difficult to apply Aquinas's natural law thinking in an age when nature is not viewed as Aquinas viewed it, as seized with reason and teleology, a view that has not survived the theory of evolution. Sullivan is smart, to be sure, but Wieseltier is not suggesting he is a profoundly committed anti-Semite, but something that is in its way even worse for an intellectual: With being a casual and superficial anti-Semite, with dabbling in anti-Semitic memes and not recognizing it.

Leon Wieseltier is one of the three smartest and most gifted people I know and his writings are always a must-read. And here he has employed his gifts in a way that I hope all Catholics and Christians will note. We have a moral obligation to be informed and concerned and vocal about even a whiff of anti-Semitism. The history is too ugly to be dumb, in either sense of that word. Ignorance is not bliss, it is complicity.

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