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Chief Rabbi of Brussels Albert Guigui talks about the rise of antisemitism in Europe and how to fight it.

By New Europe

The European political newspaper

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*Albert Guigui has been the **Chief Rabbi of Brussels** since 1987. Chief Rabbi Guigui is also a Member of the Presidium of the **Conference of European Rabbis (CER)**. New Europe had the chance to talk to him about the rise of antisemitism and what ought to be done to address it.*

New Europe: How would you define present-day antisemitism?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: Antisemitism has not disappeared. It is still dormant: under different forms, in different environments, covert or overt. Trivialized. Unpunished. We must denounce and condemn it. Systematically. Antisemitism resembles at times a collective phobia. A political and intellectual hydra, an incurable illness that rears its head after a period of incubation of variable length. The virus may remain dormant for years, but every time it awakens it appears to be more violent, more resistant to antidotes and reactions. It is a contagious illness from which western society seems unable to recover and that can appear under various forms. At times, a mutation takes place and the illness takes on a new appearance: unseen, unrecognized, ignored or looked for elsewhere. That is why it must be treated as soon as it appears! Because when antisemitism adopts a new appearance, it is first barely noticeable and it is therefore easier to hide it or, worse, to excuse it. Nowadays we have -besides traditional antisemitism- an antisemitism that comes from the left and the extreme left, a virulent negationism as well as an antisemitism that is linked to the Middle East conflict and expresses itself by way of a complex-free antizionism.

New Europe: Would you say that antisemitism is on the rise in Belgium, and more generally in Europe?





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Chief Rabbi Guigui: Yes, antisemitism is on the rise in Belgium and Europe. We are experiencing a never-ending economic crisis. People are unhappy and want, therefore, to find a scapegoat they hold responsible for their despair. And this scapegoat is of course easily found: the foreigner, the Jew, etc. This situation leads to words being used without any restraint. Those who in the past would not have dared attack Jews openly, without any complex nor taboo, do this now openly, mixing antisemitism and antizionism. But what worries me most right now is the rise of nationalisms. When I heard Marine Le Pen on television, I understood that Europe had returned to what it used to be a century ago. She resorted to notions such as “nation,” “fatherland,” “France to the French,” as if there were no longer a place for foreigners or other minorities. Glorifying the national past, worshipping heroes who once where the nation’s pride means preparing the ground for racism and xenophobia. And to this xenophobic antisemitism, one must add on antisemitism that derives from professional envy.

New Europe: What do you think should be done to stem this tide?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: First of all, we must not be afraid. Never give up, never despair. Continue leading a normal Jewish life. Jewish schools must function normally. And so must community institutions. Let us remain vigilant and united. I think that no country can totally do away with the threat of antisemitism. No matter what measures are taken, we must remain vigilant. In my opinion, Belgium is doing its best to avoid as much as possible antisemitic attacks happening. The Jewish community is involved in this effort and relies on its own security service that works hand in hand with the police forces. Actually, protecting Jewish institutions does not just mean protecting the Jewish community. It first and foremost means protecting our democracies and our Western values. The terrorist who commits an attack does not just target the Jewish community, but our democracies. He wants to destabilize our democratic structures. He attacks our human values. This is why protecting Jewish communities also means building a shield against all forms of terrorism. Our country possesses a whole array of laws making antisemitism a crime. This is a truly excellent thing, as it allowed a Belgian judge a few weeks ago to ban a meeting of antisemitic and racist leaders that was to take place in Brussels. It is that very law that allowed a French judge to prevent Dieudonné [Dieudonné M’bala M’bala, French comedian and actor] from spitting his antisemitic venom in French theatres. This law that regards racism and antisemitism as crimes must become the rule in Europe. Only thus can we limit the destructive consequences of hate speech in praise of





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violence. These laws should be efficiently applied each and every time we face such abuse and zero tolerance must be enforced. There is also -most importantly- the role of education in combating antisemitism. For the classroom is the pillar of the fight against the virus of intolerance. It is in school that one learns about integration, dialogue and becomes conscious about this cultural diversity that is the richness of our society. But it also is the place where one learns to confront so-called exclusive truths and how to fight them. The European Commission ought to collaborate more closely with the ministries of Education, so as to encourage and coordinate the efforts of Member States when it comes to establishing a Strategy for education and training. The role of education must be strengthened by making teaching the history of the Holocaust compulsory in school.

New Europe: Would you say that, generally speaking, religion-based discrimination is on the rise in Europe? Have you identified specific causes?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: I don't think so. But what has become more and more worrying is that European countries, in a perfectly democratic way, pass laws that threaten religious freedom. Some countries, for instance, have banned circumcision or are considering doing so. Or for a Jew -be he religious or secular, observant or not- circumcision is one of the pillars of his faith. For years now, ritual slaughtering has come under attack. In Belgium, for example, both Wallonia and Flanders have passed legislation banning religious slaughter. All these measures are not only worrying, but they risk making Jewish life impossible.

New Europe: What should the European Institutions do all over Europe in order to strengthen freedom of religion or creed as well as the fight against religious discrimination?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: The European Commission is aware of the seriousness of the situation and has been very active in trying to eradicate all forms of racism and antisemitism. It has designated, among other things, a contact person in charge with directly liaising between the Commission and the Jewish and Muslim communities. This person acts as an interface between the Commission and community leaders. The Commission also signed agreements with major internet providers in order to cancel within 24 hours all messages advocating hate and violence. But the Commission should now adopt a European framework in order to fight both antisemitism and islamophobia,





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using clear indicators and policies that meet the concerns of various communities. It is indispensable to involve the representatives of minorities in the ongoing fight against structural discrimination. We must invest for the long term in education, decision making, housing, employment and the health sector so as to rebuild social ties and establish a fertile ground fostering trust between communities. We have asked first and foremost that measures be taken to foster better knowledge of others and build bridges between various social strata of our society. We think that Article 17 of the Treaty should result in concrete acts so as to dynamize and fill with life this space of exchange between us. Europe must understand that we nowadays can no longer talk about 'assimilation' but about 'integration.' It must integrate the minorities that live in our countries and give their members a place, taking them as they are and not as some would want them to be. But in order to achieve this aim, Europe should give a prominent role to religions, allowing them to freely exist side by side. It should allow us to live in peace with our fellow humans without renouncing what defines us: our religious practice, our specific language for communicating within a community, our dietary habits, etc.

New Europe: How do you consider religious diversity in Europe? Is it a problem or a chance?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: We often talk about 'tolerance'. Many of us see this word as an ideal to be reached. I, for one, am not of this opinion. 'Tolerance' is derived from the verb 'tolerate', which means 'to put up with'. I think we should stop talking about 'tolerance' and talk instead about 'the right to be different'. Everybody should be able to live as he or she sees fit, on the condition that one abides by the rules of the country where one lives. This is what integration means. Integration means living according to one's beliefs whilst abiding by the rules of the country you live in. In Europe, we often are afraid of difference. Why is there so much violence in our societies? Because humans fear the unknown. When you do not know the other, you are afraid; when you are afraid, you isolate yourself; when you isolate yourself, you lock yourself up; when you lock yourself up, you become grumpy or even violent. And this is how violence begets more violence. But when I start building bridges, when I start recognising the other as he is, then the other appears to me as a "partner." Difference then becomes a treasure. Everyone can now offer that what he holds dear: Italian culture, Moroccan cuisine, Jewish liturgy... All of this is to be treasured. I often say that a masterpiece of painting with just one colour amounts to nothing. What makes a painting beautiful





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is the harmony of colours. A society where everybody would think the same things, eat the same food, dress in the same way, is horrible. What constitutes the beauty and richness of our society is difference. We should not be afraid of difference, by no means.

New Europe: Are you of the opinion that religions should work together in fighting extremism and violence? Must this be an inclusive effort, i.e. involving them all?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: This is exactly what this is about: work together. When we share common projects and face challenges together, then the other reveals itself to me as he is, as a partner who helps me find a solution to my problem. I stop fearing him and, on the contrary, we grow nearer. It is what Emmanuel Levinas calls “the epiphany of the other,” the revelation of the other. I think that if we want to combat radicalisation, we do need common projects involving all layers of society. Our whole society should take part in this discussion. We must above all try to reach the grassroots level. We cannot remain at the theory level, we must aim at the tangible level by offering common, mobilizing projects. It is through building something together that we really learn how to know and value others. Unity in plurality: this should be the message that Europe sends to its citizens.

New Europe: What would be the most important piece of advice that you would give to young believers, Jews and others, concerning the practice of religion and its role in society? And to those who do not believe?

Chief Rabbi Guigui: The most important advice is to equally love your neighbour and the stranger; fight ignorance, which is the source of all evil and, above all, never give up in despair. Fight and struggle in order to defend democratic values, fight and struggle in order to help and protect those who are in need.

<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/protecting-jewish-institutions-means-protecting-our-democracies-and-our-western-values-an-interview-with-chief-rabbi-of-brussels-albert-quiqui/>

