

# Hey, Kanye West defenders: Critiquing ‘secular elites’ is actually still antisemitism

Conservative responses to Kanye West’s antisemitic outbursts allege he was not critiquing ‘religious Jews’

**Emily Tamkin** October 19, 2022



Ben Shapiro, former President Donald Trump and Kanye West all have one thing in common: a vision of what the right kind of Jew looks like. Photo by Getty Images/Forward Montage

Todd Rokita, Indiana’s attorney general, tweeted that “the media” will “steamroll anyone if they do not kowtow to their way of thinking.” Rokita then clarified, “My post was specifically aimed at the hypocrisy of the media and Hollywood elites. I have an obvious, clear and substantial Congressional and public record of being 100% supportive of the Jewish.”



**Todd Rokita** · Oct 9, 2022



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The constant hypocrisy from the media is at an all-time high. They have now gone after Kanye for his new fashion line, his independent thinking, & for having opposing thoughts from the norm of Hollywood.



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No one should weep for Ye

The artist formerly known as Kanye West seems to be seeking out a legacy as a racist hater. Let him have it.



**Todd Rokita**

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Kanye's message in this instance is fair and accurate, & regardless, he is entitled to his opinion. The media will steamroll anyone if they do not kowtow to their way of thinking.



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Jason Whitlock, a sports commentator, [tweeted](#), in defense of West, who has legally changed his name to Ye, “you can’t question black entertainers’ unhealthy relationship with non-religious Jewish power brokers in Hollywood.”

“Hollywood elites” and “media elites” have been code for “Jews” for so long that some may indeed use them interchangeably without realizing it. The distinction that Rokita and Whitlock are weaponizing between secular Jews and religious Jews, and the idea that one cannot be antisemitic if they only criticize the former, is worth examining. It is an idea that occupies a prominent place in American history and continues to influence political discourse today.

Before the 1880s, American Jews were, by and large, treated as white Americans who prayed differently. This was important, as whiteness in this country has always brought with it rights and privileges. In the country’s earliest days, Jews were relatively small in number (about 4,000 Jews as of 1820), and so lived among white, Christian Americans as people who worshipped in different institutions. To be Jewish in this context was primarily understood as a matter of faith, not tribe, ethnicity or culture.

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If Judaism is a religion, Jewishness is something else: a religion, yes, but also ethnicities, histories and cultures. Part of the confusion is that the United States, historically, has not understood any of that. “Americans who pray differently” is legible to the United States in a way that “a religion that’s also not just a religion” is not.

Most importantly, American Jews, throughout American history, have connected to different parts of being Jewish. As the country has changed and been changed by American Jews, our understanding of what it means to be Jewish in America, and even our understandings of “religious” and “secular,” have changed, too.

This tension has carried through to today and is used by some antisemites to protect themselves against charges of antisemitism. Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros can’t be the target of antisemitic attacks, his critics say, because he doesn’t go to synagogue and because he doesn’t have a robust, positive relationship with Israel. Those Jews who do go to synagogue but not the right kind of synagogue are dismissed as fake, too.

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It isn’t only non-Jews who harp on this distinction as a dividing line between authenticity and superficiality. Speaking in Israel in July, rightwing podcaster Ben Shapiro [said](#), “It’s an unfortunate reality of life in the United States that Reform Judaism, as a branch, does not see Jewish identity in a serious way. So when people self-identify as Jews in the United States, that doesn’t actually mean that they do anything that has anything to do with Judaism; it means that their last name ends in ‘berger,’ ‘stein’ or something [similar]. And you know, there are a lot of people whose last name ends with ‘berger’ or ‘stein’ who fundamentally reject nearly all Jewish values.”

This rhetoric — thrown by Jews at one another, playing out throughout American Jewish history — is also present in our political discourse. Former President Donald Trump also has opinions about what the right kind of Jew should be. He [posted on Oct. 16 on Truth Social](#), his social media platform, that no president had done more for Israel, but that “our wonderful Evangelicals are more appreciative of this than people of the Jewish faith,” and that “US Jews have to get their act together and appreciate Israel.”

American Jews who go to all sorts of synagogues — or, for that matter, no synagogue at all — can be targeted by antisemites, or caught up in antisemitic conspiracy theories. The complicated reality is that all American Jews — the traditionally Orthodox, the Reform, the staunchly Zionist, the anti-Zionists, the secular leftists, the Hollywood machers — are inheritors of the American Jewish tradition and history. Whether a Jew engages with some of those

traditions more than others does not change the fact that they're all a part of US history, and of Jewishness.

Todd Rokita, Kanye West, Ben Shapiro and Donald Trump can all insist otherwise, and imply that not all of them — of us — are really Jewish, but history says otherwise.

The present does, too.