

Some Aspects of Medieval European Jewish-Christian Relations

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1. Overview

This must of necessity be a only an introductory lecture on a huge topic. I'll have to skip at least three points of interest: medieval Jewish culture in its own right; the triangular relations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Europe; and the treatment of other despised minorities: heretics, lepers, prostitutes, homosexuals.

Regarding medieval Jewish-Christian relations three points should be stressed above all:

A) Medieval European Jewish-Christian relations were not always violent. There were long stretches of relatively peaceful co-existence--with the Jews in a circumscribed and dependent minority position to be sure.

B) Not all Jews were upper-class: physicians, scholars, merchants, government officials. In various times and places, when they were allowed, Jews were also farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Nor, of course, were they all men, as the above list might imply. But we can say that Jewish patriarchy meant that women were only daughters, wives, or outcasts--in this way, as well as in class structure, Jewish and Christian society was similar. Individual Jewish-Christian relations were thus mediated by gender and class as well as by religion.

C) Jewish-Christian relations in Spain were different from and much more complex than those in the rest of the Latin West, due at first to Visigoth rule, then to the shifting boundaries between Muslim and Christian kingdoms.

The standard view holds that the conditions of Jews went from good to bad during the course of the Middle Ages, with the First Crusade marking a convenient turning point. The story goes that the early Middle Ages, say 400-1000, were better for the Jews than afterward in terms of government protection from Church pressure for more segregation and/or even forced conversion. Early secular leaders were said to have sought Jewish settlement for economic growth and protected them as a ready source of income, but that the economic revival after 1000, which led to an exploding Christian bourgeoisie, had three bad effects for Jews: a) lessened the relative economic utility of the Jews to the crown; b) exacerbated the resentment of poor Christians toward middle-class Jews; c) made secular leaders less likely to resist Church demonization of the Jews and the subsequent violence.

Now some might complain that this is too rosy a picture of the early period, and that it's better to say that the Jewish condition didn't go from good to bad, but from bad to worse. Whatever the conclusion about the early years, it is undeniably true that random and systematic violence, including massacres, expulsions, and forced conversions, built up over the years after the First Crusade (1096), with the worst years being the 14th and 15th C: French, German and Spanish massacres in 1298, 1320-21, 1336-38, 1348, and 1391; expulsions from England in 1290, France in 1306, 1322, and 1394; from Hungary in 1367; Austria 1421; Cologne 1426; Bavaria

1450; Spain 1492; Portugal 1497. After 1500, then, almost all of European Jewry was in the East: Poland, Russia and so on.

2. Early Relations

The people of the time, both Romans and Jews, saw the Jesus movement as a reform sect of Judaism. Paul's strategy in his preaching and conversion of the Gentile population was the turning point. If it was no longer adherence to the Law, but faith in Christ crucified, that was the key to membership in this religion, then converts would in effect not be joining Judaism, but a new religion, Christianity. That this would be an easier conversion to make for the Gentiles was obvious: no circumcision, no restricted diet. In a formula: Paul spiritualized the Law and thereby condemned the Jews to being seen in the eyes of Christian polemic as carnal, literal, mundane. The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem in 135 CE, both punishments by the Romans for Jewish revolts, no doubt helped Christian efforts to separate themselves from the Jews, and were later seen as God's punishments on the Jews for not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Things were unsettled for a while—we shouldn't underestimate the multiplicity of Christian groups—then polemical during the 2nd C, as both Christians and Jews stepped up their proselytizing—and attempts to consolidate their respective faiths from the threat of "heresies"—with the Romans somewhat bemused onlookers to all these squabbles. The subsequent 4th C Christian success in the Roman empire, leading to Constantine's conversion and the eventual orthodox Christian monopoly under Theodosius, however, left the Jews in an decidedly inferior political position.

a. What were the early Christians worried about?

They proclaimed that their faith corresponded to a universal truth: it wasn't just a belief in a subjective sense, validated by the intensity of their belief, but a belief that matched the way the world really was. But in that case, how could Jews hear the word and yet not believe? How could the people who prepared the way for Christ not believe? How could they not read the world, and the Scriptures, in the same way? The existence of Jews was a constant threat to Christian confidence in the truth of their faith, a constant taunt that world and Scripture could be read in a number of different ways, and a possible example to Gentile prospects that Christianity was not necessary for a good, pious, monotheistic life.

b. (Christian) Doctrinal points.

(Jewish doctrine, by definition, did not change w/ Jesus, though they did counter Christian typological readings of their Scripture in their own commentaries.)

A. **Paul** argued that Judaism had been superseded by Christ, that faith was more important than the Law. However, when the Jews come to accept Christ, as they refuse to do now, they would be redeemed and salvation would be complete.

B. **Tertullian** and **Origen**, writing in the early 3rd C, are often cited as examples of early typological exegesis: the Hebrew Bible becomes the Old Testament, mere prefiguring not to be taken literally, but matter for spiritual interpretations that point forward to Christ. They also, fatefully, took up and repeated against the Jews charges of devil worship, magic, and so forth that were common currency in religious polemic of the time: directed against the Christians as well by both neo-Platonists and Jews.

C. **Augustine**, with typical shrewdness, added to the picture of the early Fathers by showing the way in which the Jews' unbelief actually helped Christians! First, since the Temple was destroyed and the Jews scattered, their existence as exiles was proof God has switched his favor from them to the Christians. Second, if the Jews did not exist, why would the pagans believe the Old Testament, and without that, why should they believe that Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament? In this way he removed the scandal of the Jews that plagued the early Fathers by making a virtue of necessity, and pointed the way to a theological justification of tolerance of the Jews.

D. **Jerome** and **John Chrysostom**, roughly contemporaneous with Augustine, were notable for the ferocity of their anti-Jewish polemics. Nothing was too disgusting a term of abuse for them to hurl at the Jews. We will have to consider how such rage is produced and the social and sexual energies it channels.

E. **Pope Gregory the Great**, about 200 years later (600 CE), set the tone for the official Church position, however, as one of tolerance within limits. Jews were not to be able to own Christian slaves (the whole position of Christianity toward slavery is quite a story!), and they were not to attempt to convert Christians or pagans, although Christians could both hold slaves and proselytize. On the other hand, Jews were to be protected by the law from violence, which at this time often took the form of burning of synagogues.

3. Early governmental relations

With the exception of a Visigoth attempt to forcibly convert Jews in 7th C Spain-halted by the Muslim conquest of 711-Jews enjoyed the protected status granted them by Roman law-the codes of Theodosius and Justinian, which by and large followed pre-Constantinian policy toward minorities-under the Merovingian and Carolingian kings. Protected, but restricted in rights and privileges, and overseen by a special official, the *magister iudaeorum*, the "master of the Jews."

4. Population distribution of Jews in Europe

At first, Jews were found only along the Mediterranean coast, Sicily, Spain and Southern France. Small settlements of Jews came north following trade routes and began entering northern France, Germany and England as time went by. Their numbers were always very small, never more than 1% of the total population, except in Spain.

5. Increasing marginalization of Jews

The European economic revival of the 11th and 12th Centuries was a mixed blessing for the Jews of Europe. In the short run it was positive, carrying them north into previously backward country, only now becoming worthy of trade. But in the long run it was bad news for Jews. Rather than small-scale Jewish merchants in the luxury trade, big Christian companies in Venice and Genoa began taking a larger share of the market; at the same time, growing Christian solidarity in the towns began to take the shape of artisan guilds, which, modeled as they were on cathedrals and monasteries, excluded Jews. Usury became the main option for Jews to use the mostly modest capital built up by the family trading business over the generations. Most of the lending was very small-scale stuff, often by Jewish women. Most small lending was done with pledges of goods, much like modern pawn-brokers. This is not to say, of course, that a few enormously rich Jewish bankers did not exist.

6. The Turning Point: the First Crusade (1096)

The First Crusade was organized to fight Muslims for control of the Holy Land (and also to export the violence necessitated by the extant military machine). It began with Urban II preaching in Clermont, France. In response, some of the great barons of Europe gathered their forces and made their way to the Holy Land, where they captured Jerusalem in 1099. These armies bypassed Germany however, and thus were not responsible for the massacres of the German Jews in 1096.

These can be attributed to several groups: 1) the horde of displaced persons that followed Peter the Hermit and who met their doom in Byzantium. This crowd practiced some random anti-Jewish violence and also extorted protection money from anxious Jewish communities, but did not seem to inflict severe damages. The worst groups, 2) were the local Germans galvanized by Peter the Hermit's preaching once he reached Germany. There were both spontaneous and planned attacks perpetrated by these groups, the worst of which by the notorious Emichio of Leiningen, a local noble. It was he, claiming divine inspiration, who led the organized military assault on the Jews of Mainz, and perhaps Cologne. These were particularly horrid massacres, sparing no one, not the old, the young or the women. Some Jews turned to killing their families first and then themselves.

What inspired such violence and hate?

7. Usury, deicide, blood libel

Three things inflamed medieval Christians about the neighbor Jews: that they lent money at interest (usury); that they were responsible for the death of Christ; that they sacrificed Christian children.

A. Usury. It's sometimes said the Jews had to be usurers because they could not own land and hence could not farm. This is only half true: they could own land, but the problem was they couldn't use Christian slaves or serfs to farm it, something their Christian competitors had no trouble at all with! This inability to find cheap labor was a major factor in growing Jewish urbanization. Once in towns poor Jews were small shopkeepers and artisans, while richer Jews were larger merchants. Once the guilds took hold in the early 13th C, Jews were shut out of their humbler occupations, and moneylending became one of the few options open. By Biblical law (*Deuteronomy 23:20-21*) they were not to lend at interest to each other, but to outsiders this was permitted.

Were all Jewish usurers universally despised, regarded as Shylock-like monsters? Recent work (e.g., Joseph Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered* [University of California Press, 1990]) suggests many Jewish moneylenders were actually quite popular with their clients: they had to be: moneylending was a very competitive business and one couldn't afford a monstrous reputation.

However, we can say that despite the personal opinions of some people as to the benevolence of some Jewish moneylenders, usury had to have been a volatile topic in medieval society, and not just because some other people lost their pledges or got cheated. Rather, usury served to intensify the flow of money that was in the process of changing every aspect of medieval society. Faster and faster money turnover meant faster and faster fortunes could be made and more and more luxury goods could be bought. Both these changed the flows of bodies: new fortunes meant different flows of money and prestige in the body politic, while new luxury goods meant new flows of pleasure and qualitatively different sensations in individual bodies. What after all is a fabric or a spice than a way of charging up the skin or tongue of someone, sending new waves of intensity flowing? New flows in a body are always scary: too much and panic and rage can result.

B. Deicide: that the Jews rather than the Romans were responsible for the death of Jesus was an old Christian charge. But what did this mean for contemporary Jews born a thousand years or more after the death of Jesus? They were guilty too, went the reasoning, since in their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah they repeated the very rejection that led to his death. Whatever one thinks of this theological reasoning, the important thing is the powerful emotions that could be evoked by this charge. If one's bodily and economic system had its flows regulated by a cultural system whose code centered on Jesus as Christ, then the very thought of the killing of Christ was able to trigger an powerful rage, as the idea necessarily brought with it all the energy that went through the channels constructed by the system that bore his name. In other words, not just the cultural system, but the very feeling of bodily integrity and well-being of medieval Christians was bound up with the image of Christ, and the idea of his murder sent unbearable waves of energy through the system.

C. Blood libel: similar states of panic and rage were evoked by the charge of Jewish ritual murder of Christian children. The parallels with the bodily reaction to the idea of the death of Christ are obvious and don't need much elaboration here.

8. Why such hate and violence?

The question of European anti-Jewish violence is, to me, among the most difficult, important, and revealing philosophical questions of all-both because of its intrinsic importance and because of the light it sheds on all forms of violence. Many interpretations have been offered. Here are a few very simplified sketches of major positions, followed by some brief counterpoints. Often any one interpretation will combine several of these tendencies.

A. Institutional: In this interpretation, the Church's official position of humanitarian tolerance, as established by Gregory the Great, and the rabid hate-mongering and murderous invective of individual clerics, as exemplified

by John Chrysostom, must be seen in systematic inter-relation. In this systematic institutional analysis, the fundamental antipathy of the Church could be expressed by "extremists" who did the dirty work, while the official position was one of humanitarian concern and tolerance. Many people see this as the shrewdest hypocrisy, analogous to the contemporary official condemnation of the murder of gays: create a climate of hate, and then blame the "extremists" for taking the underlying message seriously and acting on it. This seems too strong an interpretation for me, as institutional control of any religious establishment over individual clerics can easily be exaggerated, as can be the relative contribution of the ideology of organized religion to popular hatreds like contemporary homophobia. To what extent, however, institutional contributing to a "cultural climate" renders an institution to some extent morally responsible for the violence of individuals is a very difficult question to answer for thoughtful defenders of organized religion-that is, if they're thoughtful enough to recognize at least some connection between culture and individual desires and actions.

B. Onto-theo-logical: In this interpretation, the West is driven to unity due to fundamental cultural "decisions" expressed best by Platonism: identity over difference, stability over change, and so forth. The Jews were constant incarnations of difference and diversity in the midst of a desired unity, and so had to be hated and despised, for onto-theo-logical reasons. This reading looks forward to the Holocaust as the ultimate revelation of the Western drive to unity. There is something there: who can deny that many of the great works of Western culture privilege identity over difference at least at some level? However, on the whole, this one seems a much too logical and "philosophical"-in all the worst senses of that term-reading for me, one whose basic categories, "the West," "identity," "difference," are hilariously abstract for anyone with any historical sensibility.

C. Structuralist: In this interpretation, the Jews were the "other" that allowed Christians to form their self-identity by differentiation. The basic idea here is identity through difference: cultural systems (and the unconscious, in Lacan's structural psychoanalysis) is "structured like a language," a chain of signifiers the meaning of any one of which comes from its differential position in the whole chain. Europe's Jews thus had to be hated and despised, but not destroyed, for structural reasons, for Christian society to hold itself together. I think there's something to this interpretation, especially when combined with some elementary Marxist and feminist principles: the presence of the Jewish "other" allowed a contingent unity to Christian society that prevented its dissolution into groups that might have otherwise explicitly and consciously formed around class and gender lines. In other words, since any group needs an "other" to form its "self," w/o the Jews to allow the Christians to band together, Europe might have seen the poor forming against the rich, or women against men. The problem with pure structuralist approaches however is two-fold: a) lack of specific explanatory power: we know that the Jews as "other" had to be periodically harassed, but have no way of knowing how and why any one particular harassment occurred; b) granted that cultural systems and the unconscious are structured like a language, but who says all languages are chains of signifiers? A different conception of language would yield another conception of unconscious desire. It's too complicated to go into here, but I'll allude to this other way of talking about unconscious desire elsewhere.

D. Marxist: In this interpretation, after their early utility in rebuilding the European economy, the Jews came to express the contradictions of the early capitalist system, as the need for available capital, held back by religious tradition, was solved by Jewish usury. This crucial role left them in a vulnerable position though, and they became targets of violence by victims of the economic revival, as in the example of the First Crusade, when gangs of displaced people following the knights fell upon the prosperous Jewish burghers of Germany. To Marxists this is a classic example of displaced anger, as the poor fell upon certain visible representatives of the system rather than targeting the system itself through concerted class action aimed at systematic change. In other words, the rage of the poor spent itself upon certain Jews who happened to fill middle-class positions in the system, rather than be directed to the very system itself that produces rich, middle-class, and poor as positions to be filled by individuals. I'm also somewhat sympathetic to this position, but not entirely, as classic Marxism never deals with the nitty-gritty of rage and desire: its historical materialism is not bodily enough, the historical agents reconstructed by purely Marxist historiography are either enraged by economic resentment or ideologically manipulated by Church propaganda. But are these motivations enough to explain the blind rage and wanton blood-lust of a pogrom?

E. Psychoanalytic: With the question of rage, we turn to psychoanalytic interpretations. Many readings of medieval iconography have shown how the motifs of Jewish representation, backed up by the myths surrounding Jewish behavior, triggered anxieties related to classic psychoanalytic themes: castration, engulfment, etc. Now it is undeniably true that anti-Jewish Christian culture is full of sexual themes. The real question is the form that sexuality takes: is it fruitful to trace all sexual energies back to the anxieties generated by the bourgeois nuclear family? Yes, one could say, everything is sexual, but is all sexuality worried about what mommy and daddy will think of me?

G. Historical-libidinal materialism: This is my own position, based on the work of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It's basically a Marx-Freud synthesis, dressed up with a little Nietzsche. The idea is this: the trouble with Marxism and psychoanalysis is that they both agree that production happens only in the economy and that desire happens only in the family-oriented individual unconscious. What you need is to be able to see desire and production in both places: desire in the economy and production in the unconscious (in certain cases, then, producing family-channelled desire, but in other cases not). Desire in the economy: desire is productive, it puts flows together, according to social forms. The swoops of the Gothic cathedral: how can one not see grand, creative, productive desire at work there? Production in the unconscious: why interpret everything as due to desires oriented to mommy and daddy? Freud admitted he couldn't make sense of either great artists or of psychotics; perhaps it was because they had found ways—one productive of art, one collapsing into sickness because blocked from the opportunity to produce—of channeling sexual energy outside family channels and actually doing something with it, rather than having it collapse inward into neurotic hangups about mommy and daddy. (This is of course just as much a vulgar simplification as my portraits of the other positions. Nonetheless, as with the others, this sketch does cover the essentials.)

A nice theory then, but how does it help explain violence against medieval Jews? I'll attempt a historical-libidinal materialist interpretation that takes the best of most of the above elements: institutional, onto-theological, Marxist, and psychoanalytic. (There is a way to account for structuralism in this framework, but as I warned above, it's too complicated to explain here, having to do with the non-signifier sign-system of the unconscious.) The medieval desire-production system was composed of two contrary tendencies: a decoding heading in the direction of freely-flowing capital and labor through the towns and nascent bourgeoisie (the guilds being a holding action against this tendency) and an overcoding intent on channeling flows of people and goods through the dual hierarchies of Church and feudal land-holding (here we see the Marxist angle). Now the desires of individuals follow these lines of decoding and overcoding, but not necessarily along class lines: any one particular bourgeois (including a bourgeois Jew) might overcode, just any one cleric might decode, but for the most part, statistically speaking, individual desire-production follows class lines: the bourgeoisie desires diversity and motion, clerics and lords desire identity and stability (here the institutional and onto-theological perspectives). The rage (now the psychoanalytic angle) of Christians against Jews is the result of triggers implanted in people by cultural images that provoke panic and rage-inducing decoded bodily flows of unbearable intensity in insupportable channels (Christ-killers, blood sacrifice), analogous to rage and panic-inducing decoded social flows of goods and money in the "body politic" (usury).

Whew! This is of course a bit of a *tour de force*, but I hope I've at least made a case that historical-libidinal materialism can produce a novel synthesis that accounts for many of the explanatory powers of the above list of partial interpretations.

9. Further reading

Haim Beinart, *Atlas of Medieval Jewish History* (Simon & Schuster, 1992)

Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (U California, 1987)

Joseph Shatzmiller, *Shylock Reconsidered* (U California, 1990)

Kenneth Stow, *Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe* (Harvard, 1992)

John Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews* (U Pennsylvania, 1995)

Jeffrey Richards, *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1991)

