

Critically assess the significance of the High Middle Ages (1100-1500) for Jewish-Christian Relations

Introduction

This essay examines the period that is generally accepted to have been particularly influential in the development of Christian anti-Semitism. The themes of this period were picked up and developed and by Luther which some have seen as providing the ideological justification for Nazi attitudes to the Jews, “the ideas of medieval theologians...[fed the] paganism of Nazi Germany...the ideological reasoning of anti-Judaism in Christian theology”¹. It is unlikely that Luther intended his words to provide the justification for genocide and indeed, ‘Catholic Austria was more directly responsible for anti-Semitism in the 19th than Scandinavian Lutherism’², but that said many of the ‘popular anti-Jewish stereotypes’³ have their origin and development in modern use within this period. Luther’s restatement of them was directly used by the Nazis to justify their policy of annihilation regardless of whether it is accepted that they were used out of context. The remainder of this essay will consider these stereotypes and their lasting legacy.

¹ Klenicki, Leon, “From Argument to Dialogue – Nostra Aetate Fifteen Years Later”, *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations*, Fisher, E. (Ed).

² Hillerbrand, H.J., *Martin Luther and the Jews*

³ Chazan, R., ‘Medieval Anti-Semitism’, *History and Hate: the dimensions of Anti-Semitism*, Berger, D. (Ed)., New York:1997, p49.

The Ashkenazic Jewish community was the name given to the Jewish community that was well established throughout Northern Europe. It was through the interaction of European feudal order with the self-contained Jewish community that the particularly western form of anti-Semitism took shape. Old anti-Jewish ideas were re-synthesised with the new economic, social and political realities of the time to give a particularly virulent and pervasive form of anti-Semitism that became characteristic of the modern age. The Ashkenazic Jewish community had developed with particular rapidity in correspondence to the 'rapid growth and development [of Northern Europe] during the second half of the tenth century and in the eleventh century.'⁴ The Jews, though considered as 'anomalous'⁵ to the fundamentally theocratic Catholic underpinnings of medieval society, were nevertheless incorporated as immigrants into this vibrant and emerging region.

Thus, it was a time in which the foundations for modern Europe with the increasing urbanisation and gradual emergence of the city-state, were being laid. Europe was asserting its own sense of cohesiveness and identity. The Jews were soon considered problematic as the societies strengthened themselves. The Jews were a particularly peculiar problem because they were not necessarily ghettoised in the modern sense of the word, 'Jews spoke the vernacular, were deeply enmeshed in the expanding economy, and

⁴ Chazan, *op.cit.*, p51.

⁵ *Ibid.*

absorbed much of the spirit of this vital civilisation'⁶. Jews were often liberal in the sense that they were open to embrace aspects of the culture of their host community whilst yet maintaining a clear distinctiveness as Jews. This complexity of their interaction has remained a feature that often placed almost as much distance between Jews in other parts of the world and the Ashkenazic Jews. It has frequently prevented them speaking with a single Jewish voice or common identity and it was not until the second half of the 20th century experience that the balance of this dynamic was fundamentally changed.

The Catholic heart of Europe was constantly struggling with the Jewish question. The Jews were viewed, along with all other non-Christians as fundamentally in religious error. However, the Augustinian legacy had permitted a place, afforded to no other group, to Jews within Christendom. This was a place as a living, breathing testimony as a cursed and rejected people providing a sign for Christians as to the supremacy of their faith. This theological understanding of the rejection of the Jews and their fall from grace was embedded into the liturgy and calendar of the Church. This quickly translated itself from the ultimate symbol of the truth of Christ crucified by Jews in the theological sphere into an ideological and cultural understanding of the Jews as full of murderous enmity and malevolence.

⁶ Ibid., p52.

The Cross and the Resurrection were the witnesses against the Jews, their condemnation was just and their suffering deserved. Theological understanding became mixed with a common prejudice to produce a hostility and suspicion towards the Jew *per se*. As the civilisation of Europe began to revolutionise and the domination of Rome began to weaken, the uneasy dialectic between toleration and ridicule of the Jews began to have ever more vicious extremes. The success of the emerging nations was causing dissent with the traditional Roman views for the first time for centuries. The reaction of the Catholic hierarchy was to focus on heresy within the Church but also to view with increasing suspicion the danger posed by non-Christians in their midst. Different parts of the Holy Roman empire were now clearly at odds with the principles of *Constitutio pro Judeis* and it even took the direct representation of influential Jews to the pope to ensure that hostility did not spill over into violence against the Jews⁷.

The pivotal point of this period was reached when the papacy attempted to harness the new found confidence and militancy within the empire for the crusade against the Muslim world. The focus on the external enemy inevitably caused some to consider the danger of the internal enemy, 'particularly since the internal enemy is ultimately more hostile and reprehensible'⁸. The German crusading bands assaulted Worms, Mainz and Cologne with a new and distinct ideological agenda of the 'enemy within'.

⁷ Chazan, *Medieval Anti-Semitism*, pp54-55.

⁸ Chazan, *op.cit.*, p56.

Although the impact of these assaults was localised, this idea of the 'enemy within' was a potent symbol and rallying cry for the fanatical ecclesiastical laity sometimes beyond the control of the Church hierarchy. It was the driver for the vicious Spanish Inquisition. The prevalence of this idea, modified and adapted in both secular, political and religious contexts in the subsequent centuries would lead to ever greater demonisation and anger towards the Jews. The idea is clearly seen in the words of Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, who when describing his conversion from a 'weak cosmopolitanism' understood that 'by defending myself against the Jew, I am doing the work of the Lord.' Despite the repudiation of the excesses of the First Crusade against Jews by the hierarchy prior to the Second Crusade in the 1140s, the Jew was now firmly established within the European consciousness as 'outsider and enemy'⁹. Chazan considers the persecutions of this time as conceptually different, 'the ideological negation of the legitimate place of the Jews in the Christian world'¹⁰.

The twelfth century saw the Jews move into the banking sphere on the back of their long-standing alliance with the ruling classes of their host nations. The demand for capital in the rapidly expanding economies and the Church stance against Christians lending to Christians provided a vast opportunity for the enterprising Jew, aided and abetted by the aristocracy, to be the empire's

⁹ Chazan, op.cit., p56.

¹⁰ Chazan, R., *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, Los Angeles:1987, p220.

banker. The business specialisation of the Jew and the obvious new perception of the Jew as greedy and lascivious would be exacerbated in the following centuries. The enormous power of the Jewish banker in European society soon became *the* symbol of the greedy and reprobate Jew that eventually led to the expulsions in the 14th century all over Franco-German Europe. The increasing suspicion and legislation against the Jews to engage in normal commerce had caused an ever greater shift into the lending business which further reinforced the perception of the Jew as greedy and reprobate. By the close of the period, the 'blood libel' was championed by Catholic Doctor of Theology, Johann Eck and the Jews were perceived as sub-human, greedy, evil and degenerate people¹¹.

It is probably no coincidence that this 'blood libel' was first established in 1144 in the wake of the Second Crusade. It was another example of a remarkable enduring symbol for an aggressive lay Christian movement. There was an increasing dissonance of the local clergy with the official church policy. The influence, success and wealth of the local Jewish community may have been the source of envy that drove the unnamed monk to pen the depictions of Jewish cruelty against Christians. This was in despite his admission that no-one had witnessed the event and the local authorities and substantial numbers of the local townspeople were not interested in blaming the Jews¹².

¹¹ Edwards, M., *Luther's Last Battles*, pp115-142.

¹² Chazan, *Medieval Anti-Semitism*, p58.

The Jews were the only organised group within society that seemed to be able to challenge the local Church leadership and yet remain outside their reach. The Jews with their wealth, land and power were to be attractive targets for the unscrupulous. To disenfranchise them and then seize the goods became a feature of the period's war against heresy although it must be acknowledged that it was not only Jews that suffered throughout Europe. The special heresy courts were frequently used as cloaks to dispossess the wealthy and influential dissenters within the newly founded nation states of the Empire. The Kings and clergy would collude to ensure the land and asset grabs were expedited as efficiently as possible and divided between them and Rome. Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain provided the model for other monarchs with their establishment of the Inquisition. Their treatment of the Jews was particularly cynical as it was primarily the Jews that funded their war against the Muslim Moor civilisation. When the war was won, they turned on the Jews with even a personal visit from the chief rabbi simply resulting in a 'convert or die edict' issued by the King. The controversy that arose from within the Jewish community and the obvious fake conversions, directly gave rise to the logic for the Inquisition and the *murranos* ('swine') experience.

In the Western areas of France and England, Jewish usury became tightly enmeshed with the governmental structures of the monarchy and a symbiotic relationship was created. However, extreme taxation of the Jews was arbitrarily levied at intervals by greedy monarchs which compromised the vitality of the business whilst the perception of the Jew as the pawn of the establishment, was an easy target for the venting of the frustration of the

mass of the populace excluded from the wealth of their nation. This was the era where the seeds of peasant revolt were beginning to be watered and the Jew was too easily seen as the agent of the greedy landlord, 'the masses...suffering under the lash of socio-political and natural calamities, found in the Jew a scapegoat'¹³.

Parallel to these developments was the increasing assertion of a Church ever more concerned with limiting the influence of powerful Jews on the Christian populace. For the Jews to foreclose on Christians had a profound theological contradiction that did not sit well with those concerned with maintaining the inferior status of the Jews. The fourth Lateran council of 1215 was significant in that it reinforced the 'social segregation of the Jews'¹⁴ by insisting they should dress in a readily recognisable fashion. The logic was simple: the Jews could not corrupt the religious, social or economic order of Christian society if they were readily recognisable. Jewish subterfuge and conspiracy could be readily recognised before it could begin.

As mentioned previously, the most extreme expression of this principle was in the *marranos* experience in Spain in the 15th century where the Jewish converts to Christianity began to be more hated than the real Jews. The authenticity of their conversions were doubted and their continuing success envied by the population. The establishment of the Inquisition led to a

¹³ Flannery, E.H., *The Anguish of the Jews*, New Jersey:2004, p143.

¹⁴ Chazan, R., *op.cit.*, p60.

wholesale slaughter of Jews and moved onto the Moslem Moor civilisation. The later period of the Inquisition was doubly significant in that it had a racial dimension as well as a theological one, it was one of the first expressions of 'racial anti-Semitism'. The Jew could not escape by baptism. There was also the political significance in that the Inquisitors were frequently becoming beyond the control of the papacy as the nation states began to exert their independence from Rome and act in their own self-interest.

The annihilation of the Jews was made possible because of the critical point in the theological status of the Jews that had been reached in the 13th century when increasing knowledge of Talmudic Judaism within the Church caused some to assert that Judaism was backslid from Moses and thus the toleration of the Jews granted by Augustine was no longer valid:

"Some saw that the rationale for the justification of the toleration of the Jews was passed as the Talmudic and Midrashic texts showed that Jewry had moved beyond its antiquarian mode that Augustine had used to justify their continued existence. The polemic developed to undermine the legitimacy of the Jew in European "Christian" society. The Jews came to be seen as having backslid from Moses and were therefore no longer a legitimate presence in European society."¹⁵

Catholicism on the whole embraced and developed this idea into modernity with key theologians promoting and giving patronage to ever more vile presentations of the Jews. Luther's initial warmth towards the Jews is sometimes interpreted as the reaction against this Catholic stance¹⁶ with his own hostility towards the Jews arising from his personal experience of

¹⁵ Cohen, J., *Traditional Prejudice and Religious Reform*

¹⁶ Edwards, M., *Luther's Last Battles*,

engagement with the rabbis on matters of exegesis and interpretation of the scriptures.

The libel of the desecration of the host and the mocking of the blood of slain Christian youngsters was allowed to enter the folk religious culture. The loose psychological justification using the connection with the original cruelty to the crucified saviour was enough for the accusations to become embedded. This gave rise to 'increasingly irrational perceptions of Jews...from the domain of medieval art...[ones] of animalization and demonisation'¹⁷. The perception of the Jews as intellectually deficient and morally repugnant was a logical corollary of a people that could have possessed the truth yet rejected it. There was no explanation beyond that they were a cruel and cursed people that deserved no mercy, 'to mistreat the Jews is considered a deed pleasing to God'¹⁸. They had become agents of the Antichrist, they were responsible for poisoning of the Christian populace whilst they remained healthy. These people were the agents of the 'omnipresent satanic forces'¹⁹ at work in the world, 'the terms "Jewish" and "diabolical" had become all but synonymous.'²⁰ The Devil is seen to embody 'all the forces of heresy and rebellion against God' and this is the role that the Jews have adopted for themselves. They are

¹⁷ Chazan, *Medieval Anti-Semitism*, p62.

¹⁸ Abelardus, P., "Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum, et Christianum", *The Anguish of the Jews*, Flannery, E.H., New Jersey:2004, p143.

¹⁹ Chazan, op.cit., p63.

²⁰ Flannery, E.H., *The Anguish of the Jews*, New Jersey:2004, p143.

truly the 'sons of the Devil'²¹. The list of accusations by the close of the period that were imported into modernity is discussed impressively by Trachtenberg. His key question was simple, 'why are Jews so cordially hated – and feared?'²² and his answer, '...the mythical Jew, outlined by early Christian theology and ultimately puffed out to impossible proportions, supplanted the real Jew in the medieval mind...the old notion of the Jew retained its ancient lustiness into the new times.'²³

Conclusion

It has been seen that the myths surrounding Jewish depravity were developed and enhanced for a variety of social, political and religious reasons. The Jews were first welcomed because of their utility in business but as the civilisation of Europe strengthened they were first discarded and then expelled. The Jews were seen both as a social threat and a religious evil. They were dehumanised and identified with the satanic forces of darkness. These libels though completely irrational and unreasonable, managed to be imported into modernity and liberalism so that the Jewish culture and religion were generally viewed with suspicion and hostility in the modern West. The medieval conclusions of Luther as to the 'solution' to the Jewish question were imported directly into Nazism.

²¹ Bonfil, R., "The Devil and the Jews", *Anti-Semitism through the Ages*, Almog, S. (Ed), Exeter:1988, pp91-98.

²² Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, Philadelphia:1983, p1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p216.

However, theologically, the medieval period of the High Middle Ages was particularly significant because it dismantled the Augustinian protection that had been afforded to the Jews by nature of their election. This meant that anti-Judaism morphed into racial anti-Semitism and the Jew had nowhere to hide as the persecutions grew in their ferocity. Conversion was no longer an option and Hitler was to kill you if a single Grandparent was racially Jewish. In this sense, more than any other, the foundations for genocide were laid in this period.

2500 words.

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