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The Church and the Jews in the Middle Ages

THOMAS F. MADDEN

We might well wish that the relationship between the medieval Catholic Church and the Jews had been better, friendlier, more modern. But it was not modern, nor should we expect it to be. It was, however, a relationship marked by mutual respect and a remarkable degree of tolerance in an age that knew little of either.



Before examining the Catholic Church's relationship with the Jews in the Middle Ages, it would be worthwhile to state an obvious yet often overlooked fact: The Middle Ages were, well, medieval. In a modern, post-Enlightenment world, religious belief is merely a personal preference, like a favorite color. But in most premodern civilizations, religion is a central, if not predominant, aspect of ones personal and collective identity. To seek to corrupt or defame a cultures religion would therefore be the equivalent of treason in the modern era. In both cases the crimes were thought to be severe enough to warrant the death penalty.



Jews in Medieval Armenia


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All of this is just to say that before the 18th century, religious tolerance was no virtue. No one doubted that heretics, blasphemers, pagans, and infidels had to be dealt with swiftly to prevent them from damaging the faith, leading others astray, and calling down divine wrath. This was the attitude of Jews in biblical times as well as Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages although the means and methods were different with each religion. It is not too surprising, then, that Christianity's main rivals vanished after it was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. What is surprising is that one of those rivals, Judaism, was singled out for toleration and protection by the Church. As a result, the once mighty cults of Isis, Mithra, and Diana disappeared without a trace, yet Judaism still survives.

To understand the medieval Church's attitude toward Jews, one must begin with St. Paul. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul insisted that observance of the Mosaic Law, which entailed things like dietary regulations and circumcision, was no longer necessary. A new covenant had supplanted the old. Indeed, St. Paul admonished the Christians of Galatia for their observance of the Law, since the observance itself suggested that they considered faith in Christ insufficient for salvation (Galatians 3:1-29).

It was in his letter to the Romans, however, that St. Paul laid the foundations for the medieval Church's attitude toward the Jews. There he wrote:

Let me put a further question then: is it possible that God has rejected his people? Of course not. I, an Israelite, descended from Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin, could never agree that God had rejected his people, the people he chose specially long ago. [Romans 11:1-2]

If they were not rejected, then:

have the Jews fallen for ever, or have they just stumbled? Obviously they have not fallen forever: their fall, though, has saved the pagans in a way the Jews may now well emulate. Think of the extent to which the world, the pagan world, has benefited from their fall and defection then think how much more it will benefit from the conversion of them all. [Romans 11:11-13]

In other words, by their refusal to accept Christ, the Jews had made it possible for the Gentiles to be saved. Paul is certain, though, that one day the Jews will see the truth (Romans 11:16-24). He concludes:

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The Jews are enemies of God only with regard to the Good News, and enemies only for your sake; but as the chosen people, they are still loved by God, loved for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice. [Romans 11:28-29]

These words became the guiding principle of Christian attitudes toward Jews for many centuries, but they could be difficult to hear in the first three centuries of Christianity. Jews viewed Christianity as a blasphemy against God and a perversion of their faith. In third-century rabbinic texts, Jesus was described as a magician in league with Satan, Mary as a prostitute, and the apostles as criminals who deserved death. Daily Jewish prayers often included a plea for God to destroy the sectaries, the term used to describe the Christians. Roman persecutions against the Jews ended in the third century, just as the persecutions against the Christians were starting to heat up. Although the Jews were not responsible for Roman persecutions, it was not unusual for some Jews to take part in them. As St. Jerome wrote, the Jews in their synagogues blaspheme the Christian flock: and while they slay us, they will their own destruction in the eternal fire.

St. Jerome's response was not unusual. Most Christians were keenly aware of Jewish antipathy toward them, yet they held fast to St. Paul's words. Early Church Fathers, like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and others, wrote tracts against Judaism, yet none of them called for persecution. Instead, they admonished fellow Christians who persisted in Jewish practices (like St. Paul's Galatians) and made the case that Christianity was not a new religion but the culmination of Judaism. The latter assertion was important, since potential Roman converts measured a religion's worth in terms of its antiquity.

The Roman persecutions of Christianity came to an abrupt end with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312-337). In a flash Christianity went from a struggling underground religion to the faith of the aristocracy. Constantine, who saw himself not only as Roman emperor but as the defender of the Church, issued several laws regarding Jews. He forbade the Jewish practice of stoning converts to Christianity and ordered Jews to stop circumcising their Christian slaves. He also made it unlawful for Christians to convert to Judaism. His son, Constantius (337-350), outlawed intermarriage between Jews and Christians. In every other way, though, the emperors left the Jews alone. They retained full rights as citizens, including the right to worship freely.

During the remainder of the fourth century, matters remained fairly stable between Christians and Jews. That is not to say, however, that there were not tensions. Jewish communities were naturally alarmed at the extent at which these sectaries were growing in strength and

numbers. By the end of the fourth century, the Roman Empire was overwhelmingly Christian. In 392 Emperor Theodosius I (379-395) closed the last of the pagan temples, making Christianity the official religion of the empire a remarkable turnaround given that the same empire was vigorously persecuting Christians less than a century earlier. Nevertheless, Theodosius continued the policy of toleration toward the Jews. In 393 he declared attacks on synagogues to be a major offense.

The victory of Christianity, however, continued to be a sore point among Jews. In cities with sizable Jewish populations, there was a good deal of anger directed against the new Christian masters. At times this led to bloodshed. For example, in Alexandria in 414, decades of tension erupted when a Jewish mob launched a well-planned attack against Christian worshipers, killing a great many of them. The local authorities responded by expelling the Jews, uprooting a community that dated back to the foundation of the city.

At about the same time, at a town called Inmester in Syria, a Jewish celebration of Purim turned into an ugly anti-Christian rally. It was the practice to burn or hang an effigy of Haman, an enemy of the Jews, on Purim, yet the Jews at Inmester abducted instead a Christian boy, bound him to a cross, and flogged him to death. The Roman world was stunned by the crime. Emperor Theodosius II (402-450) responded by excluding Jews from certain government positions and forbidding the construction of new synagogues. In the Theodosian Code, strict regulations were placed on the celebration of Purim. Christians were also instructed not to have intimate or personal intercourse with Jews, which might lead to intermarriage. This law mirrored similar Jewish restrictions against fraternization with non-Jews. Nevertheless, the code did uphold the rights and citizenship of all Jews and protected existing synagogues.

It was St. Augustine who laid the second foundation of the medieval Church's attitude toward the Jews. Writing in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Augustine rejected the claims of some Christians that the Jews were the servants of the devil. At the core of Augustine's philosophy on the Jews were the words of Psalm 59: Slay them not, lest my people forget: scatter them by thy power; and bring them down, O Lord our shield. The Jews, Augustine wrote, were clearly wrong. The course of history had shown that their faith and rituals had been supplanted. But they served as a constant reminder of the antiquity of the Christian faith and the glorious gift of salvation that Christ had poured out on the Gentiles. Clinging to their scriptures, the Jews were a witness for the veracity of the Old Testament and its prophecies of Christ's coming. Augustine insisted that Jews should be treated with respect because they belonged to God, who would bring them one day to the fullness of salvation.

The fall of the Roman Empire in the late fifth century left chaos in its wake as barbarian tribes fought over the dismembered corpse of antiquity. The collapse of the Roman state forced the Catholic Church to step into the vacuum, feeding the poor, caring for the sick, organizing defenses, and trying to build some kind of order in so much mayhem. The popes in Rome soon took direct control over the city and region, becoming secular lords as well as spiritual leaders. The same was true with other bishops across western Europe. Thus began the Middle Ages.

Pope Gregory I (590-604) spelled out Church policy toward the Jews in his decree *Sicut Iudaeis Non*. As might be expected, it was a synthesis of Roman law and the philosophies of St. Paul and St. Augustine. Gregory wrote, Just as the Jews should not in their synagogues be free to do anything not permitted by law, so also in those things granted them they should have no infringement of their rights. During his pontificate, he put these words into practice, intervening to protect Jews from violence and insisting that Jewish rituals be tolerated. Yet he had no power to force faraway barbarian lords, many of whom were not Catholic, to heed his commands. In his own domains, however, Gregory rigorously defended the Jews. Indeed, throughout the thousand years of the Middle Ages, Rome and the papal states were the only places in western Europe where the Jews were at all times free from attacks or expulsions. The medieval papacy's unflinching defense of the Jews was not lost on the Jews themselves, who frequently came to the throne of St. Peter for justice and support against their enemies.

Despite papal pronouncements to the contrary, secular rulers and local communities in Europe were at times quite willing to persecute Jews. Jewish merchants living in towns along the Mediterranean had effectively established themselves in commerce, particularly in the slave trade. This had a way of inflaming the righteous indignation of barbarians, especially those recent converts to Catholicism. In 612 Sisebut, the Visigothic ruler of Spain, ordered the Jews in his kingdom to release their slaves and accept baptism or be expelled. Similarly, King Dagobert of the Franks ordered the expulsion of the Jews in his lands in 629.

It was, of course, possible for Church leaders to accept the papal directives concerning the Jews while still remaining critical of Jewish practices. In the ninth century, St. Agobard, the archbishop of Lyons, wrote, Since they dwell among us, we ought not to be malignant to them, nor should we threaten their lives, safety, or property. Let us observe the convention ordained by the Church, which is explicit in defining how we must be at once cautious but humane in our dealings with them. Nevertheless, St. Agobard strongly objected to the Jewish policies of Emperor Louis the Pious. He was particularly upset that the

emperor had forbidden slaves owned by Jews to be baptized. Since baptism required the manumission of the slave, this had the effect of depriving the Jews of their property. St. Agobard argued that Louis's decree withheld salvation from souls, when the obvious answer was simply to pay the Jews for their losses. St. Agobard apparently had close contact with some Jews, for he knew all about the *Toledot Yeshu*, a collection of stories about Jesus and His disciples that was popular in medieval Jewish communities. In it, many of the old insults were repeated, but many new ones were included: for example, that Peter was called Rock because of his hardness and dullness of intelligence and that Christ's body was simply washed away when the Jerusalem aqueduct overflowed. But St. Agobard was particularly upset by the fact that Jews were changing Judaism. On the basis of certain rabbinical writings, they were adopting new beliefs and practices that he considered superstitious. He was one of the first Christians to notice the Talmud, something that would have powerful ramifications in later centuries. Nevertheless, despite his many criticisms, Agobard, like the popes, never supported persecution of the Jews.

The next few centuries were bad ones for the Church. Europe was hit by a new set of punishing invasions that tore apart what little order had been restored since the fall of the Roman Empire. It was only in the eleventh century that the Church could raise its head above the rubble and begin rebuilding. The reform movement of that century quickly picked up steam, restoring papal control over the Church and rooting out clerical abuses. The popes were particularly concerned about ending violence, not only against Jews but against all noncombatants. Initiatives like the Peace of God and Truce of God were devised by the Church to stop the killing, but such efforts met with limited success.

The resurgence of the Church in the eleventh century also allowed Christians in western Europe to take stock of Christianity's position in the wider world. It was not a happy picture. Core Christian lands like Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor had fallen to Muslim invaders. Even the birthplace of Christianity had been conquered. The Crusades began in 1095, when Pope Urban II called the knights of western Christendom to come to the aid of their eastern brothers and restore to them the lands that had been conquered by the Muslims.

The Crusades are often cited as an early manifestation of European anti-Semitism. That is simply wrong. Anti-Semitism was alive and well long before the Crusades and would remain so long after the last crusader had hung up his sword. From the very beginning of the Crusades, the Church made a sharp distinction between Muslims and Jews. In a letter to the bishops of Spain, Pope Alexander II specifically forbade anyone from equating holy wars against Muslims with violence against Jews. He wrote, The matter of the Jews is entirely

different from that of the Muslims: the latter actively engage in war against Christians; the former are everywhere ready to remain peaceful.

Nevertheless, many Jews were killed in the Crusades. During the First, Second, and Third Crusades, there were misguided, misinformed, or cynical attacks on Jews. The Church actively opposed these attacks, and local clergy often came to the defense of Jews in their community. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, preaching the Second Crusade, told the soldiers of Christ, The Jews are not to be persecuted, killed, or even put to flight. When a fellow Cistercian monk began exhorting Germans to destroy the Jews before waging war on the Muslims, St. Bernard went personally to put a stop to it. As Rabbi Efraim of Bonn wrote:

Bernard said to them [the Crusaders]: It is good that you go against the Ishmaelites [Muslims]. But whosoever touches a Jew to take his life, is like one who harms Jesus himself. When our enemies heard his words, many of them ceased plotting to kill us. Were it not for the mercy of our creator in sending the aforementioned abbot [Bernard] and his later letters, no remnant or vestige would have remained of Israel. Blessed be the redeemer and savior, blessed be his name.

The Crusades were bad for European Jews because the religious enthusiasm that they engendered often spilled over into popular attacks on the infidels at home. But the purpose of the Crusades was never to kill Jews.

The Fourth Lateran Council held in 1215 is often remembered for its anti-Jewish decrees. It is true that the council excluded Jews from various public offices, yet this was merely a restatement of existing Roman law. More troubling from the modern point of view was the requirement that all Jews wear identifying badges. This naturally conjures up images of German Jews forced to wear cloth badges by the Nazis. But the clergy of the 13th century were unfamiliar with the atrocities of the 20th. The medieval badges were part of a larger attempt to avoid sinful behavior in Christian society. The same council also required clergy to wear distinctive dress, so that they too could be immediately identified. This, they hoped, would head off lewd or sinful behavior toward, or on the part of, priests. By the same token, the Jewish badges were meant to warn Christians who might otherwise unknowingly become intimately familiar with a Jew something also forbidden by Roman law.

The rise of universities in the 13th century led to an increasing familiarity with Hebrew among Europe's intellectuals. This naturally led Christian scholars to examine Jewish sacred scriptures. What they

found there troubled them. Like St. Agobard several centuries earlier, they discovered that the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament, in which the covenant was established between God and His people) was dwarfed in size by the Talmud. The latter consisted of another body of law, believed by Jews to be of equal antiquity to the Torah, though not written down until the early centuries a.d. The Talmud, therefore, was the means by which rabbinical Judaism had grown, adapted, and changed.

Yet the existence of the Talmud posed a real problem for the Church. One of the reasons for toleration of the Jews was their witness to, and preservation of, the sacred scriptures of the Old Testament. The presence of the Talmud suggested that they were doing neither. Furthermore, if, as Christians believed, the only acceptable continuation of Judaism lay in the Gospel and the redemption of Christ, it stood to reason that these later writings must be false. Suddenly, Judaism looked less like a witness to the past and more like a present heresy.

The Talmud was brought most forcefully to the papacy's attention in 1239, when a former Jew, Nicholas Donin, informed Pope Gregory IX that it was filled with errors, blasphemies, and heresies. Gregory sent a letter ordering secular lords to confiscate Jewish literature and turn it over to the ecclesiastical authorities for study. The following year, St. Louis IX of France summoned to his court a council of rabbis to defend the Talmud. They failed to convince the Church's scholars, who concluded that the Talmud had supplanted the Torah, leading the Jewish people to abandon Mosaic Law. Louis ordered the confiscation of all copies of the Talmud in Paris. A few years later, Pope Innocent IV, acting in response to Jewish complaints, ordered a new investigation of the Talmud. But the new commission came to the same conclusion: The Talmud was filled with blasphemies against God and the Christian faith.

In response to these findings, Innocent IV enshrined in canon law the right of the pope to act to preserve Judaism from heresy. On the face of it, this may seem absurd. But it was entirely consistent with the Church's long-standing defense of the Jews. St. Paul and St. Augustine agreed that the Jews must be respected, not out of some anachronistic appreciation of religious diversity, but because they were both a witness to the truth of the Old Testament and the chosen people who would one day come to salvation through Christ. The Talmud struck at the heart of both of these rationales. Henceforth, for the popes, defending the Jews meant not only defending Jewish rights and persons but also the purity of the Jewish faith. In practice, though, Church-sponsored confiscations of the Talmud were rare.

The 13th century also brought the expansion of the Inquisition. The medieval Inquisition is a big topic, but very little of it is related to the Jews. Dominican inquisitors were generally careful not to tread on Jewish rights. When they did, Jews were quick to bring their grievances to Rome and the popes were just as quick to admonish the inquisitors.

The only point at which the medieval Inquisition and the Jews intersected was in the matter of apostasy. According to Roman law, and therefore canon law, a Christian was forbidden to convert to Judaism. The problem was that throughout the Middle Ages secular authorities or local populations frequently threatened to attack or expel Jews unless they accepted baptism. Most Jews moved on, if they could. But many others would go to the baptismal font rather than lose their lives or property. When the persecution was over, these baptized Jews would return to Judaism or, fearing the Inquisition, exist in a netherworld between the two faiths. The Church did not recognize a forced conversion as valid, so long as the person repudiated baptism within a reasonable amount of time. Yet if someone received baptism without objection, even if they were acting in response to an implied or spoken threat, that was considered valid. In other words, although the popes were opposed to anti-Jewish violence, if it led to a silent acceptance of coercive baptism, they were forced to recognize the validity of the sacrament. It was the job of the inquisitors, therefore, to make certain that these new Christians remained Christian.

Of all medieval institutions, the Church stood alone in Europe in its consistent condemnation of Jewish persecutions. Yet they happened anyway. England expelled all Jews in 1290; France in 1306; Spain in 1492. Europeans disliked the Jews for their affluence and for the closed nature of their society, which seemed to scorn Christians. Jews were commonly believed to use Christian blood in their rituals, to desecrate the host, and to engage in ritual murder. Kings increasingly saw Jews as nonsubjects and therefore detrimental to their kingdoms. When the Black Death arrived in the 14th century, the Jews were accused of polluting the wells or incurring divine disfavor through their rituals. Pope Clement VI issued bulls in 1348 repudiating these widely held beliefs, insisting that the Jews lives and property be respected. But his words, and those of his successors in the 14th century, were ignored. By the beginning of the 15th century, the only safe place in Europe to be a Jew was in the lands of the pope.

We might well wish that the relationship between the medieval Catholic Church and the Jews had been better, friendlier, more modern. But it was not modern, nor should we expect it to be. It was, however, a relationship marked by mutual respect and a remarkable degree of tolerance in an age that knew little of either.



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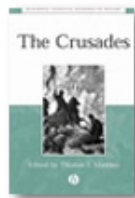
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The Author

Thomas F. Madden is associate professor and chair of the Department of History at Saint Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of *Enrico Dandolo and the Rise of Venice*, *A Concise History of the Crusades*, *The Crusades: The Essential Readings*, and coauthor of *The Fourth Crusade*.



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