

2: CHRISTIAN–JEWISH INTERACTIONS OVER THE AGES

For much of the past millennium, the world's Jewish population has been concentrated in the Christian areas of the globe. As a result, Christian attitudes and behaviors toward Jews have been paramount in conditioning Jewish fate. Jews have had to contend regularly with a Christian environment—its dangers, its pressures, and its stimulation. Christian impact on the Jewish minority was particularly strong during the Middle Ages, when the powerful Roman Catholic Church exercised considerable control over key aspects of societal existence and when Christian imagery pervaded every facet of individual life. With the movement from the Middle Ages to modernity and the waning of the power of the Roman Catholic Church, widely held Christian attitudes and perceptions have maintained their hold on majority thinking and have continued to affect the Jewish minority.

Christians, over the ages, have been far less exposed to the influence of Jews. The major instance of Jewish power exercised over Christians was brief, but because it occurred during the formative period in Christian history, impressions of negative Jewish impact upon Christianity have been embedded in Christian consciousness. Also, during the Middle Ages, Jews constituted the only non-Christian element in many areas of western Christendom, thus presenting useful—although hardly appreciated—stimulation to the Christian majority.

Over the past few centuries, Jews in the predominantly Christian sectors of the world have continued to have a circumscribed but significant influence on Christian culture.

In differing ways, then, these two faith communities have deeply affected each other, often negatively. As the two faith communities have ranged against each other, Christians and Jews have tended to perceive and highlight the negative interplay. Less obvious and less noted have been the fruitful interactions between the two communities, interactions enriching to both sides.

Negative Interactions

The First Century: Crucifixion

Negative interactions between Christianity and Judaism can be traced back to the very origins of Christianity. At the earliest juncture in Christian history, Jesus and his followers were part and parcel of the fractious Jewish community in first-century Palestine. Palestinian Jewry was divided politically into Jews who favored accommodation to the Romans and those who favored rebellion against them; it was divided spiritually into Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and a number of other religious subgroups. Although the earliest stages of Christian history are shrouded in obscurity, it seems safe enough to say that Jesus and his followers ranged themselves—along with others—in opposition to the Jewish authorities in first-century Palestine and may well have suffered some adverse consequences as a result of their oppositional stance.

The Book of Acts is replete with stories of Christians suffering persecution at the hands of the Jewish authorities. However, all these stories of the persecution of Jesus' followers pale in comparison to the tale of the crucifixion of Jesus himself, which is key to the New Testament portrait of the Christian Messiah and Savior and stands at the very core of the Christian faith. Once again, the historical reality is blurred. We possess detailed Gospel accounts of Jewish culpability for the crucifixion but have no way of judging the accuracy of these reports. In any case, the reality of Jesus' crucifixion combined with the authoritative Gospel accounts of it have served to create a lasting perception of Jews and their faith. In the most central drama of

Christianity—the crucifixion and resurrection—Jews play the role of persecuting villains, inflicting incalculable damage on Christianity and its hero.

Christianity and Christians remained susceptible to Jewish influence for only a brief period of time. Quickly, the young faith showed signs of wide-ranging appeal, first to Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews and then increasingly to Gentiles. Christianity rapidly spread beyond the confines of Palestinian Jewry, indeed beyond the confines of Palestine. As Christianity distanced itself from its Jewish moorings and attracted a large following throughout the Roman Empire, it escaped any shred of control by the Palestinian Jewish authorities. Nonetheless, the early stories of persecution, in particular the purported Jewish role in the crucifixion, served to establish an image of Judaism and Jews that would exert profound influence on Christian thinking over the ages.

The reality of a Gentile majority within the Christian community necessitated a number of adjustments. On the theoretical level, the issue of Gentile Christianity, Judaism, and the world order had to be faced. What emerged was an important and complex theory of historical progression. According to this view, the Jews had indeed been the chosen people, intended for an ongoing covenant with the one God whom they had brought into the world. The Jews had regularly stumbled in their appointed vocation, as indicated eloquently by the prophets of Israel, who had attempted recurrently to bring their people back to fulfillment of the covenant. As a result of the advent of Jesus as promised Messiah, the Jewish failure to acknowledge him as such, and the breathtaking act of occasioning his death, the Jewish people—again as warned by its own prophets—forfeited forever its role in divine history. The place once occupied by the Jewish people had of necessity to be ceded to a different group, the Gentile Christian community, which thereby fell heir to the responsibilities, the promises, and the glory once the portion of the Jews. Blindness to divine truth became, for Christians, the hallmark of Jews. Ongoing Jewish commitment to Judaism, which Christians saw as erroneous, was readily explained by this blindness. At the same time, this theory of historical progression served to deepen the significance of the alleged Jewish role in the crucifixion. As noted, Christian theory posited that role as the decisive factor in the disruption of the divine covenant with the Jews and the transmission of that covenant to Christians, the successor people.

The Second to Fourth Centuries: Christian Ascendancy

Through the second and third centuries, Christianity continued to attract a multitude of followers. Christianity now constituted a major problem for the leadership of the Roman Empire in its entirety. A critical juncture in Christian–Jewish interaction was reached early in the fourth century, when the rulers of the Roman Empire abandoned their persecution of Christianity and instead embraced it. This shift, so momentous for the subsequent history of the Western world, raised for the first time the question of the place of Judaism and Jews in a society ruled by Christians and committed to the advancement of the Christian worldview. What developed was a position of moderate toleration. Judaism was seen as error-ridden and displaced; it was, however, sufficiently important and valued as to necessitate its legitimization. Jews were to live a tolerated, albeit limited, existence within the Christian commonwealth. The limitations to be imposed on Jewish life were aimed at obviating potential harm that Jews might inflict on their Christian hosts and at maintaining Jewish inferiority in ways that would highlight their error and punishment.

This position of moderate toleration, forged during the heady times of Christian ascendancy in the Roman

Empire, required theological grounding, which was advanced by a number of major thinkers, perhaps most strikingly by Augustine. These thinkers rooted the toleration of Judaism in the pedagogical value Jews might provide, once more highlighting alleged Jewish shortcomings. As noted, Christianity had recognized an early Jewish role as the people of God's covenant. This Christian acknowledgment was tempered by the claim that the Jews had capped their long history of recalcitrance by committing a sin—the crucifixion—so dastardly as to occasion the rupture of the covenant God had struck with the Jews and their replacement with a new covenant people, the Christians. God had responded to this sin with immediate punishment, exile, and degradation of the Jews. In this view, the Jews as a degraded people served a most useful pedagogic role, attesting to the working of sin and punishment in God's universe and—in the process—to the truth of the Christian faith as well.

Slightly less demeaning to the Jews was a second rationale for maintaining Jewish presence in Christian society. In this view, Jews played a useful function by attesting to the authenticity of prophetic prediction.

Jews proclaimed regularly to the world that the visions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets of biblical Israel were divinely inspired and true. From the Christian perspective, Jewish understanding of these prophets was deficient, a function of the blindness already cited. Nonetheless, the Jewish insistence on the truth of the prophetic visions played a useful role in the Christian case for Jesus' mission. If those who stood outside the Jewish and Christian camps could be convinced of the divine inspiration and truth of the prophetic words—with the help of disinterested Jewish testimony—then a simple and direct reading of those prophetic words would, it was presumed, lead inevitably to Christian conclusions.

The Middle Ages: Increasing Contact

While Christianity emerged as the dominant religion in much of the Western world, Jewish life was in fact centered to the east, in areas that lay outside Christian hegemony. With the great Muslim conquests of the seventh century, the bulk of world Jewry found itself living under the rule of yet another competing monotheism. For treatment of both Jews and Christians living within Islamic domain, the Muslims adopted much of the stance that Christianity had developed toward its Jewish minority. However, Islam lacked the potent sense of Jewish (or Christian) roots and Jewish (or Christian) malevolence that is so prominent in the Christian–Jewish interaction. Radically different historical development, in which Jews (and Christians) played a relatively inconspicuous role, accounts for the relative mildness of the Muslim–Jewish (and Muslim–Christian) interface.

For the first half of the Middle Ages, Christendom was much on the defensive against the new and vigorous forces of Islam. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the balance of power in the Western world began to shift slowly but decisively in the direction of Christendom. This shift held profound implications for the history of the West and for the history of Christian–Jewish interaction. Increasing numbers of Jews came under Christian rule, partly as a result of Christian conquest of Muslim territory and partly through Jewish migration in the direction of vital and rapidly developing societies. These increasing numbers had important ramifications. Jews, always a theoretical issue for Christianity because of its Jewish roots, now presented practical problems and concerns as well. And from the Jewish perspective,

Christianity now became the faith that most affected—in both negative and positive ways—the realities of Jewish life.

As Jewish presence in western Christendom expanded, the moderate toleration designed during the fourth century as the framework for Jewish existence in Christian society remained very much in effect. The notions of precluding Jewish harm and maintaining Jewish inferiority lent themselves to considerable adaptation and intensification. In particular, western Christendom, from the late twelfth century on, became increasingly concerned with a variety of minority groupings in society and sought to counter the dangers these dissident groups allegedly posed. In the case of the Jews, the Roman Catholic Church augmented the regime of limitations under which they lived, often to the point of drastically constricting Jewish life. The leadership of the church identified a series of important limitations intended to curb alleged Jewish harm—social segregation, rigorous censorship of Jewish literature, and restrictions on Jewish economic activity.

From their earliest days of power in the fourth century, Christian authorities were concerned to minimize the influence Jews might exert on their Christian neighbors. Early church enactments addressed relationships in which Jews were perceived to wield authority and hence influence. Jews were forbidden to own Christian slaves, occupy positions of political authority, or take Christian spouses. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Jews had become increasingly concentrated in the Christian sphere and no longer held slaves, occupied positions of political power, or took Christian spouses, the church became concerned with and attempted to mitigate all relations that might have allowed Jewish influence on Christian neighbors: Christians working in Jewish homes, Jews living in small towns where social relations were inescapable, Jews living alongside Christians in larger towns. The most extreme measure adopted by the church was the call for distinguishing garb, intended to single out the Jew at all times.

Yet another type of damage feared by the church over the ages was the possibility of Jewish blasphemy. Obviously, Jews were deeply opposed to Christianity and expressed their opposition vigorously among themselves. Public expression of such opposition was, however, prohibited. Again, during the thirteenth century, this old prohibition was intensified. Nicholas Donin, a convert from Judaism to Christianity, brought purportedly anti-Christian statements in the Talmud to the attention of the papal court. Donin's allegations sparked careful investigation of the charges, condemnation and burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1242, prohibition of the Talmud in certain sectors of western Christendom, and censorship of the Talmud in others.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, an entirely new area of church concern with potential Jewish harm emerged. After the church had inadvertently opened up new business opportunities for the Jews of western Christendom through its efforts to wipe out usury among the Christian population, perceptions of the harm inflicted by Jewish moneylenders intensified. Once more, the demand that Jews live in Christian society without inflicting damage was sounded, this time to warrant a series of moves intended to limit Jewish moneylending and the ill effects it allegedly caused. In some instances, such Jewish business was prohibited entirely.

The foregoing Christian stances toward Jews and Judaism were essentially defensive—moves initiated by the church and executed by the secular authorities in order to protect Christianity and Christians. One set of further initiatives was aggressive. Missionizing has been a major Christian preoccupation over the ages. Successful proselytizing turned Christianity from a small subgroup in Palestinian Jewry into a serious threat to the Roman Empire and then into the dominant force in that vast empire. Historically, the Christian commitment to missionizing always included an effort to bring Jews into the faith. In some periods, the commitment to proselytizing among Jews took on heightened significance, turning into a genuine preoccupation among certain church leaders.

During the middle decades of the thirteenth century, the effort to convert Jews intensified. The church

allocated resources to train expert missionizing personnel, made an effort to convince the secular authorities to support the proselytizing campaign, and took care to cultivate new lines of argumentation. The church's commitment to missionizing among the Jews remained strong throughout the concluding centuries of the Middle Ages, with considerable success. Especially on the Iberian peninsula, large numbers of Jews were brought to the baptismal fount, often as a result of the argumentation with which they were ceaselessly confronted. Many of the conversions, however, were effected through the illegitimate imposition of force.

Escalating Violence

All the measures discussed thus far have involved Christian anti-Jewish initiatives that were legitimate within the framework established by the church, but illegitimate violence was yet another dimension of negative Christian–Jewish interaction during the Middle Ages. Anti-Jewish violence resulted from a variety of damaging stereotypes of Jews and Judaism. In medieval western Christendom, the realities of Jewish life itself conditioned some of these stereotypes. Thus, Jews were often perceived—particularly in northern sectors—as newcomers, which they in fact were. As a result, Jews suffered many of the stigmas normally associated with recent arrivals. The further realities of limited economic outlets often put these Jewish immigrants at the cutting and unpopular edge of the economy and in a potent alliance with the political authorities. This new status affected the imagery of Jews in western Christendom, but it was the negative legacy from antiquity that most shaped medieval Christian perceptions of the Jews.

The church insisted that the alleged Jewish role in the death of Jesus and the persecution of his followers was not to serve as a ground for acts of revenge. Christians were not to avenge Jesus, largely because God himself had taken care to do so, by stripping the Jews of their role in covenantal history and consigning them to exile. Christians were to treat Jews with the charity that might hopefully open the eyes of the latter to Christian truth. Not surprisingly, the niceties of this theory could readily be lost in times of tension.

In western Christendom, the First Crusade served in many ways as a point of considerable transition. On the material level, the great expedition called forth by Pope Urban II in 1095 reflected the growing power and militancy of western Christendom. A century earlier, such a western initiative would have been unthinkable; a century later, it was commonplace. Spiritually, the sacralization of battle and bloodshed represented a significant innovation for Christian thinking. Surprisingly and unsurprisingly, the call to arms against the forces of Islam had a disastrous impact on some of northern Europe's leading Jewish communities.

This turn of events was surprising in that, so far as we know, Pope Urban II, his ecclesiastical advisers, and the barons who played a leading role in the enterprise took no note whatsoever of Jews. The military venture called for and undertaken was projected as a war against the armies of Islam, an effort to reach the holiest sites of Christendom and liberate them from Muslim rule. However, given the legacy of negative Christian imagery of Jews and Judaism, the unforeseen anti-Jewish violence is not all that difficult to fathom.

Along the Rhine River, German crusaders and local burghers assaulted a number of Jewish communities, sometimes with devastating results. The most frightful slaughter was committed by one particular crusading force, a ragtag army that coalesced around the little-known figure of a Count Emicho, probably of Flonheim. For the costly assaults on the Jewish communities of Worms, Mainz, and Cologne, we possess a number of sources—both Christian and Jewish—that corroborate one another rather fully. Christian and Jewish sources are in accord about the following crusader slogan, here offered in the version found in the oldest and most

trustworthy Hebrew narrative of the events of 1096: "Behold we travel to distant land to do battle with the kings of that land. We take our lives in our hands in order to kill and to subjugate all those kingdoms that do not believe in the Crucified. How much more so [should we kill and subjugate] the Jews, who killed and crucified him." Explicit here is the view that of all the enemies of Christendom, the Jews are surely the most loathsome, the most deserving of vengeance at the hands of Christian warriors.

In the wake of the limited but costly anti-Jewish violence associated with the First Crusade, ecclesiastical leadership was deeply concerned to obviate repetition of such illegitimate anti-Jewish behavior. The spiritual leader of the Second Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, went to considerable lengths to denounce the thinking that had led to the 1096 massacres and to oppose incipient manifestations of anti-Jewish zeal. He wrote extensively on behalf of the endangered Jews and imposed himself in person to put down danger when it threatened. The major Jewish chronicler of the Second Crusade and its impact on northern Europe's Jews, Ephraim of Bonn, knew well of Bernard's interventions and appreciated them deeply. Still, Bernard's case for Jewish safety began with the traditional assumptions of Jewish sin and of God's punishment of the Jews through exile and the rupture of the prior covenant. Bernard of Clairvaux thus simultaneously fostered Jewish safety and reinforced the negative stereotypes that jeopardized the Jews.

Intensified Anti-Jewish Imagery

The stances of Bernard of Clairvaux, subsequent ecclesiastical leaders, and the major secular figures associated with the later crusades succeeded in obviating repetition of the violence that marred the First Crusade. However, during the middle decades of the twelfth century, the traditionally negative Christian imagery that gave rise to the bloodshed of 1096 underwent significant evolution. Bernard's great contemporary, Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, gave eloquent voice to the intensified anti-Jewish imagery. Whereas Bernard had spoken of Jewish acceptance of secondary status and subjugation, Peter claimed that—quite to the contrary—the Jews of his day were involved in an ongoing effort to inflict harm upon Christians and Christianity. In effect, Peter claimed that the Jews of the twelfth century regularly expressed the selfsame hostility, albeit in a different form, that had led their ancestors to call for Jesus' crucifixion. Peter singled out two patterns of purportedly hostile Jewish behavior—their incessant blasphemy of the Christian faith and their harmful economic practices. For Peter the Venerable, Jews constituted a present and unremitting threat to the well-being of Christian society.

Peter the Venerable did not create this new sense of the Jews as people steeped in hostility and malevolence; he merely provided articulate expression for a broadly held view. Evidence of this new and damaging perception of Jews can be found in many quarters. During the middle decades of the twelfth century, the most striking reflection of this new perception can be found in the dangerous stereotype of Jews as murderers of Christians, particularly Christian youngsters. It is of course significant that the Christian victims are identified as youngsters. Besides highlighting the defenselessness of the victims, this perception suggested groundless hatred on the part of the Jews, hatred of these youngsters simply for their Christian faith. In an age noted for its imagination, this broad notion of groundless murder by Jews was embellished with the claim that these murders took place in ritualistic fashion, as a reenactment of Jesus' crucifixion. This claim was articulated for the first time in the middle of the twelfth century by Thomas of Monmouth, chronicler of the life and death of the young Saint William of Norwich.

The thirteenth century saw further embellishments of the theme articulated by Peter the Venerable and expressed in the ritual-murder allegation. A widely known and damaging embellishment involved the charge that Jews ritually abused the host wafer. The descendants of those who allegedly murdered Jesus purportedly continued to express their ongoing hatred through maltreatment of the wafer that is the enshrinement of his

body. From the middle of the thirteenth century down into the twentieth century, many Christians accepted yet another variation on this theme: the ritualized Jewish use of Christian blood as an expression of Jewish hatred of Christians.

Just as such leaders as Bernard of Clairvaux had opposed vigorously the radical crusading notion of human vengeance against Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, so, too, did ecclesiastical authorities generally reject the ritual murder allegation, the host desecration charge, the blood libel, and the anti-Jewish violence they spawned. However, by the end of the thirteenth century, these imaginative embellishments of traditional Christian notions of Jewish enmity and malevolence began to take a considerable toll of Jewish life. Waves of anti-Jewish violence swept northern Europe in the 1290s, the 1330s, and the 1340s. By 1391, the violence reached Spain as well, costing tens of thousands of Jewish lives and forcing large numbers of Jews to the baptismal font. In the wake of the First Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux had embraced the stereotype (Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion) but condemned the actions of the rampaging crusaders; now church leadership decried both the stereotypes (for example, the blood libel) and, even more strongly, the assaults.

Through most of antiquity and all through the Middle Ages, the balance of power in the Christian–Jewish relationship was heavily skewed in favor of Christians. As noted, Jews exercised power only briefly in the long history of Christian–Jewish relations. However, the legacy of that brief period was indelibly inscribed in Christian consciousness. Jews were seen as the killers of Christ and as intent upon expressing their hatred of and harming his followers. Thus, Christians and Jews were heavily focused on mutual perceptions of animosity and harm.

Positive Interactions

Although Christians and Jews over the ages have left largely unexplored the positive interactions between their communities, such positive interactions did in fact take place. Christians have benefited from the presence of Jews in the Christian world, and Jews have been attracted to the Christian world because of the advantages they perceived it to offer.

What Christians Gained from Jews

Given its power, Christianity has regularly posed the question of whether Jews should be tolerated in a Christian society and has regularly responded in the affirmative. As we have seen, these affirmations of Jewish rights have been based on notions of the useful purposes Jews serve and have almost always been couched in demeaning terms. But sometimes views of Jewish utility did not have such negative overtones.

Although Bernard's demand for Jewish safety during the Second Crusade began with the notion of divine punishment of the Jews for the crucifixion, he proceeded to add other elements to his case, including genuine Jewish docility under Christian rule. At the end of his complex set of arguments for Jewish safety, Bernard demanded security "for those from whom we have a law and a promise, from whom we have a forefather, and from whom we have Christ of the flesh." This is a direct statement of the positive role Jews and Judaism had played in the evolution of Christianity. And there is no reason to stop with such overt articulations. Christendom of late antiquity and the Middle Ages in fact benefited in diverse ways from Jewish presence.

On many occasions, Jews served a useful pioneering role in Christian culture, bringing the advantages of a more advanced milieu to an area in the process of development. For example, as a mobile people, Jews were attracted to the rapidly developing areas of northwestern Europe during the tenth through twelfth centuries and brought useful skills and techniques from their Mediterranean places of origin. German Jews who moved eastward into the rapidly emerging Kingdom of Poland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries played the same role. In both cases, progressive Christian rulers were unabashed in their support for Jewish settlers who would improve the general economy of the areas over which they ruled.

In addition to their contribution to rapidly developing geographic areas, Jews were also a cornerstone of the emergent sectors of the medieval economy. Again, as a minority with limited economic outlets, Jews were willing to move into risky sectors of the economy and make a pioneering contribution. The outstanding example of such a contribution involves the important, dangerous, and reviled economic activity of moneylending and banking. Medieval western Christendom required a flow of capital, but the church impeded this flow with its policy on usury. Modern historians of the European economy note that Jews made a significant contribution to the economic maturation of European society through their lending activities. Nonetheless, these activities were highly unpopular and reinforced the dominant Christian perception of Jews as ranged in harmful opposition to Christianity and Christians.

Jews likewise made notable contributions to the spiritual life of medieval Christendom. The easiest contribution to document is the Jewish command of the Hebrew language, the language of almost all the corpus that Christianity had absorbed into its sacred literature as the Old Testament. Medieval Christians generally read their Old Testament in the accepted Latin translation and accorded sanctity to that version. From time to time, however, awareness of the Hebrew original and a desire to penetrate it led Christian savants to seek enlightenment among their Jewish neighbors. The same twelfth and thirteenth centuries that saw deepening Christian mistrust of the Jewish minority also saw protracted efforts in certain intellectual circles to enhance Christian understanding of the Hebrew Bible by encountering it in its original. To that end, Christian scholars, such as the well-known school of St. Victor, were comfortable in approaching Jewish contemporaries and enjoying the benefit of their facility with Hebrew.

The final benefit derived by medieval Christendom from its Jews reflects a distinctly modern perspective. For the medieval world, homogeneity was the ideal, with the regnant worldview unchallenged by alternatives. From this perspective, medieval Jews were thus a disruptive and negative influence, to be tolerated but rigorously controlled. Moderns have come to view religious and intellectual life in radically different terms. For moderns, creativity is in fact dampened by homogeneity and enhanced by difference. According to modern observers, the challenge of difference, more than anything else, has stimulated human creativity over the ages. And indeed, the Jewish presence in western Christendom provided an important goad to Christian reflection and spiritual growth.

Precisely because of the intertwined roots of the two faith communities, the Jewish challenge to Christianity moved Christian thinkers all through the Middle Ages to ponder, to reconsider, and to reformulate old insights. Judaism and the recovered legacy of ancient Greco-Roman thought provided the two major stimuli to creative Christian reflection, and again the twelfth and thirteenth centuries stand out as the centuries of the most notable activity.

What Jews Gained from Christians

Discussion of the benefits derived by Jews from the medieval Christian–Jewish encounter must begin with a simple observation. Just as the Jewish minority suffered more from that encounter than

did the Christian majority, so, too, did the Jewish minority benefit more from a rich, complex, and dynamic majority civilization.

Although medieval Christians spoke, usually in a demeaning way, of the benefits of having the Jews in their midst, medieval Jews speculated little on the benefits conferred by Christianity. There was occasionally a sense that the Christian and Muslim religions served the valuable purpose of spreading religious truth among the nations. But if these two daughter faiths were successful, it was only because they provided useful popularizations of genuine Jewish truth. Despite these occasional reflections, Jews were not deeply concerned with validating the Christian presence, since that presence was such an overwhelming reality. Jewish efforts were far more fully focused on combating the challenges the Christian majority and its faith presented.

The simplest index of Jewish benefit from medieval Christian society is the demographic reality of Jewish life. Despite the disastrous results of the influx of Jews into western Christendom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it is striking to note that at no point did a majority of Jews turn their back on western Christendom and relocate or return to the Islamic world. Even after the expulsions from the more advanced sectors of the Christian world at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, the northern European (Ashkenazic) Jews opted for the less developed Christian sectors of northern Europe, rather than moving in numbers back into the (steadily declining) Muslim lands. Obviously, these Jews sensed something about the balance of power in the Western world and opted to stay in the hostile Christian sphere, out of a sense of the advantages it offered. When Jews did leave western Christendom to move back into adjacent Muslim territory in large numbers, it was at the end of the fifteenth century, when the Spanish (Sephardic) Jews were expelled from the Iberian peninsula and almost no contiguous Christian lands were open to them. But even after this mass exodus, the imbalance between Jewish population in the Christian and Muslim spheres reasserted itself, once more a tribute to the advantages of the Christian West.

These advantages were, first of all, material. From the tenth through the twelfth centuries, the Christian sector of the Western world caught up with and surpassed the previously more prosperous Muslim sector. For Jews, as a mobile minority community, there was obvious advantage in locating within the geographic area that was enjoying the most impressive economic gains, rather than remaining in an arena of steady economic decline.

The advantages Jews enjoyed were surely more than material, as well. Western Christendom flourished in a variety of ways, all of which had meaning for both the Christian majority and the Jewish minority. Cities grew continuously in medieval western Christendom, and Jews were overwhelmingly city dwellers. Patterns of governance matured, in ways advantageous to both the majority and the minority. Literacy expanded, and culture developed in a number of fruitful directions, with advantages again to both the majority and the minority.

As was the case for medieval Christianity, medieval Jews gained something else from their encounter with Christianity: the creativity that arises from difference. Jews were, of course, far more cognizant of the religion of the Christian majority than were Christians of the religion of the Jewish minority. Everyday life was suffused with Christian monuments, symbols, and celebrations. Jews were deeply aware of medieval Christianity and, as a minority, profoundly challenged by it. Once again, medievals did not usually see such challenges in a positive light, but moderns do. Modern observers would comfortably suggest that medieval Judaism was very much invigorated by its ongoing encounter with Christianity. That encounter regularly stimulated consideration of the essentials of the Jewish faith and the ritual and moral precepts through which that truth was expressed. That there was so much conscious reflection on parallels and contrasts with Christianity attests to the challenge of majority culture and to its role in advancing the clarification of Jewish

ideas and ideals.

Modernity

With modernity has come the dissolution of the world order introduced into the West by the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire. The fragmentation of the Roman Catholic Church opened the way for this dissolution. The fragmentation itself occasioned no real change in Christian attitudes toward Judaism and Jews. The case of Martin Luther is instructive. Like so many reforming predecessors, Luther saw prior policy toward the Jews as error-ridden and as an opportunity to show the superiority of his new vision. In his early essay, "That Jesus Was Born a Jew," Luther castigated the Roman Catholic Church for its harsh treatment of Jews. His own milder and more loving stance would, he believed, bring the Jews to Christian truth. Disappointed in the Jewish response to his overtures, Luther turned angry and vicious in his denunciation of the Jews. In his later "On the Jews and Their Lies," he leveled harsh charges against the Jews and incited Christians to anti-Jewish violence.

With respect to the Jews, it was not the content of the Reformation thinking that was decisive, it was simply the breakup of the monolithic character of western Christendom. So long as there was one dominant church in western Christendom, the intimate linkage of church and state that typified the medieval order could be maintained. With the proliferation of Christian churches, the linkage could lead only to persecution, warfare, and carnage. Fairly quickly, voices began to call for a new order that would be founded on toleration of diversity. Although such diversity was initially seen in Christian terms—toleration of a variety of Christian groupings—it was soon extended to Jews and others. The position of the Jews in the West was irrevocably altered.

Much of the negative interaction described above came to an end. The secular authorities in the West no longer enforced the onerous restrictions or the aggressive missionizing that had been so prominent in the Middle Ages. To be sure, this change did little to efface the negative imagery that had developed over the centuries. Once again, Jews were in many instances recent immigrants, found niches in developing but unpopular sectors of the economy, and were perceived as locked into a limited political stance. These real characteristics were interpreted against the backdrop of the New Testament and the medieval imagery of the malevolent and harmful Jew, now simply adapted to the new circumstances of modernity. Despite Jewish hopes for greater acceptance and tranquillity, the tendency toward anti-Jewish violence was maintained and in some cases intensified. Indeed, the restraining voice of ecclesiastical leadership that had combated some of the most obnoxious anti-Jewish stereotypes was very much weakened with the advent of modernity.

The kinds of mutual benefit outlined above have also been maintained and reinforced in the modern period. Jews have continued to play a catalytic, albeit often unappreciated, role in the development of the modern economy. With the advent of modernity, Jews, again unable to find their place in the well-established sectors of the economy, made their way to the new, the exciting, the risky, and the often despised. Jewish contributions to modern civilization moved into entirely new domains. The universities of the West, which had been church institutions during the Middle Ages, began to break their ecclesiastical bonds and slowly opened themselves to Jewish presence and contribution. Newly developing areas of cultural creativity likewise felt the impress of Jewish presence and creativity.

Jewish appreciation of the vitality of western Christendom was obviously enhanced by the new opportunities that flowed from the sundering of the tight relationship between church and state. Once freed of medieval constraints, Jews rapidly located themselves in the great cities of the West. As the Americas in general and the United States in particular began to emerge as a magnet for migration, Jews joined that migration, expressing their hopes in a younger and seemingly freer society and casting their lot with the vision that animated that society. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of world Jewry was located in lands that housed a Christian majority.

The one obvious exception to the Jewish preference for the Christian sphere has been the establishment of the State of Israel in the heart of the Muslim world. This development has resulted from the ideological significance of the Land of Israel to the Zionist movement, which rejected resolutely all alternative sites for the Jewish homeland/state. Yet even this exception points up the close identification of modern Jewry with the Christian West. It is precisely the sense of the Jewish state as an outpost of the Christian West that has occasioned a good part of the Muslim resistance to Zionism and the State of Israel.

Over the past century, as Jews have suffered some of the most horrific disasters in their long history, new stimuli to Christian–Jewish cooperation have emerged. As the magnitude and horror of the Holocaust became obvious, observers both Jewish and Christian sought to identify the wellsprings of the hatred that moved one part of European society to undertake the systematic annihilation of Jews while the other part sat passively as the killing was carried out. Attention in many quarters fastened on the legacy of Christian anti-Jewish thinking, moving many Christians to search for new relationships to Jews and Judaism. How successful these innovative efforts might prove will be known only during the course of the next century.

At the same time, both majority Christians and minority Jews have slowly begun to see that the old relationship of antagonism is in many ways outdated. Many Christians and Jews have concluded that all religious communities must unite in the face of powerful forces that seek to destroy these traditional religious communities and their belief systems altogether. In the face of modern anti-religious tendencies and movements, interreligious disputes have become a luxury that many view as no longer affordable. This perception of the deteriorating circumstances of the religious communities has resulted in new modes of cooperation and new mutual respect. Again, how long-lived these tendencies might prove will be known only with the passage of time. There does seem to be a real possibility that some of the negative interactions of the past (which were in any case never the whole of the story) may give way to more positive relations between two faith communities that have sprung out of common ground.