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SET SAIL: Holocaust as History and Memory

Dec. 14, 2022

Antisemitism and Christianity in the Early Middle Ages

When and how did antisemitism gain traction? Expanding on its usual description of hatred to Jews, Peter Hayes, professor emeritus of German and history at Northwestern University among other distinctions, describes his own definition as “the belief that Jews have common repellent and/or ruinous qualities that set them apart from non-Jews.”¹ This attitude was present in the Classical era which preceded the Early Middle Ages, or the Dark Ages, but it reached its height during this time as Christianity became institutionalized. Once it did, the church had considerable influence on the widespread culture of antisemitism. Now, this is not meant to excoriate Christianity, but to discuss its role in the phenomenon. Antisemitism in European society can be examined through the lens of the Church to analyze how religious rhetoric bled into all of areas of life for Jews.

The rise of malevolence to and fear of Jews corresponds with the emergence of Christianity because Jews refused to kneel before anyone. The consequences of rejecting Christianity were dire and everlasting. “Traditional antisemitism is based on religious discrimination against Jews by Christians.”² Peculiar stories about Jews arose or hardened as creed by European church leaders in the first millennium. They are the foundation of Christian antisemitism and became deeply

¹ Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 3.

² “Antisemitism” (The Holocaust Information Center, Yad Vashem Central School for the Teaching of the Holocaust, n.d.), https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205742.pdf.

entrenched in the religion as the clergy perpetuated them. Two central myths served as justification for the Church's argument that the Jews deserved to suffer: the Deicide, or the Killing of God, Myth which taught that Jews were responsible for Jesus's crucifixion, and the Supersession Myth, alleging Christianity's replacement of Judaism.³ The former demonstrates how much early Christian leaders wanted power — by relaying outright lies. Along with both religions' origins in the Old Testament, the latter reflects Christians' desire to establish the legitimacy of their spin-off to Judaism by asserting Christianity supplanted it. Hence, when Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, Christians tried to force them to step aside.

Atrocities committed against Jews, such as “the destruction of the” Second Temple “and the scattering of” their people, were taken as “punishment both for past” crimes and “continued failure to” accept the new faith.⁴ Additionally, resistance to conversion implied “service to the Antichrist,”⁵ who was “said to be a Jew, the Wandering Jew, Satan himself, or the offspring of Satan and a Jewish prostitute.”⁶ It was regarded as “innate disloyalty to European (read Christian) civilization,” too, though individual converts were treated suspiciously.⁷ This said, it should not be surprising that Christian figures utilized the antithesis of their faith — evil — and linked it to the people who threatened their ascension to both power and heaven. Jews and the Devil became synonymous. Diving deeper into Satanism, as agents of the Devil, Christians attributed Jews black magic conspiring to “destroy Christendom” and “conquer the world.”⁸ Worst of all, the Church

³ “Antisemitism.”

⁴ “Antisemitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-from-the-early-church-to-1400>.

⁵ “Antisemitism in History.”

⁶ Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, eds., *Antisemitic Myths* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 5.

⁷ “Antisemitism in History.”

⁸ Perry and Schweitzer, *Antisemitic Myths*, 5.

charged the Jewish people with blood libel, or ritual murder, which falsely accused them of sacrificing Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes. These outrageous myths incited pogroms which were among the most frequent expressions of antisemitism throughout time. It is impossible to determine the exact reason for these accusations, but it is no doubt that fearmongering fueled hate. It is also foolish to assume that the two denominations never got along. Both wanted to practice their respective faiths peacefully, but once Christianity became standardized by the early church, animosity towards Judaism spiked. All these myths corrupted Christians' minds and hearts against their religious siblings over the years, culminating in oppression. The problem in the Early Middle Ages was conversion, and the Jews were to survive through ill-treatment until they did.

Religion was paramount during this time, more powerful than monarchy and the centerpiece of identity. Thus, the church had control over public and private life in Europe. Myths affected Jews' lives in many ways that have evolved throughout the centuries. One was through the enactment of laws and the violence and stereotypes that stemmed from them. "Policies, customs, and laws segregated Jews from the rest of Europe, relegated them to certain jobs, and prohibited them from owning land."⁹ Because they could not own land, farming was out of the picture. Laws further reduced the work Jews could get involved in by "bann[ing them] from joining Christian guilds."¹⁰ Reducing Jews to pariah status and thereby limiting their freedom was another conversion tactic, an avenue to make their lives a living Hell as the fathers preached. What the Church did not realize, or refused to realize, was their actions when they face hardship:

⁹ "Antisemitism," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism>.

¹⁰ "Medieval Antisemitism – The Holocaust Explained: Designed for Schools," accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/anti-semitism/medieval-antisemitism/>.

“Ghettoization... confined Jews to certain usually despised or dangerous activities, such as moneylending or leather tanning.”¹¹ Hence, the stereotype of Jews and greed was born. The Church put them in those situations, pinned it on their so-called stubbornness, and made advancement difficult. Segregation made Jews an easy target for hate, allowing prejudice to fester.

When people could not explain adverse incidents like natural disasters or political changes, Jews became scapegoats for them, adding to the myth of the Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. Another way the Church controlled and exacerbated Jews and gentiles' relations with each other was the documentation of history. They were able to control what was considered true. This was the case during the Frankish period in the fifth and sixth centuries in which “many Church council decisions...[forbade] Christians, both clerics and laymen, to eat with Jews...oppose[d] mixed marriages; g[a]ve warnings about the observation on Sundays of the countless Sabbath prohibitions; and [forbade]” ...mingling with Christians on Easter.¹² Discriminatory laws such as these were designed to reinforce the Christian message of othering. Jews were attacked for everything that went wrong, including their own existence. “[A] correlation between social crisis and the slaughter and expulsion of Jews had become firmly established” “[i]n the late Middle Ages.”¹³ This implies that adversity and suffering were already associated in the early Middle Ages. Panics waxed and waned though, as evidenced by the outbreaks in the early seventh century and again following the millennial year.¹⁴

There are few surviving sources that recount civilian opinion toward Jews in the first millennium other than occasional comments about their occupations. The crucifixion myth must

¹¹ Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*, 10.

¹² Léon Poliakov, *The History of Antisemitism*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 27.

¹³ Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*, 11.

¹⁴ Hayes, 11.

have been firmly rooted into Christians' minds. The clergy was responsible for written evidence of the rhetoric that existed during this time. The papal record comprised mixed and partly two-faced views from 500-1500. For example, Gregory I favored assimilation but was protective of Jewish rights and "demand[ed] justice in their regard under...Roman Law."¹⁵ He preferred conversion, but still largely argued in their favor, which is not real tolerance. This changed in the following century, but expulsions began in Europe in the seventh century. Religious difference was the alleged source of specific Christian oppositions such as persecutions and banishments even when it had little or nothing to do with them. Scapegoating, xenophobia, anger, and politics are the factors of this behavior, but baked into religion. "The only text of an anti-Jewish" argument of the Frankish period was Gaul Evagrius which was "more of a warning to Christians than an attempt to evangelize the Jews."¹⁶ This implies that Jews in Gaul were prominent and many, and a concern to the clergy by freely mingling with their people. They felt the need to step in to ward off their flock from this bad influence. Gregory of Tours offered more detailed information about the Jews at the end of the sixth century.¹⁷ In addition to having diverse occupations such as "artisans" and "physicians," they were "numerous in cities...represented for the Church enemy par excellence, as evidenced by...: "Liars to God"; "close-minded, ever-incredulous race"; "wicked and perfidious nation."¹⁸ Despite having a wide range of skills, the Church still preached Jews' dangerous influence and probably tried to forcefully convert them. Of course, there was still the monarchy, so they had to have had permission to conduct this act. "Other than the... information of Gregory

¹⁵ Gerard S. Sloyan, "Christian Persecution of Jews over the Centuries," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/about-the-mandel-center/initiatives/ethics-religion-holocaust/articles-and-resources/christian-persecution-of-jews-over-the-centuries/christian-persecution-of-jews-over-the-centuries>.

¹⁶ Poliakov, *The History of Antisemitism*, 27.

¹⁷ Poliakov, 27.

¹⁸ Poliakov, 27.

of Tours” there is “no further concrete details about the status of the Jews in Gaul.”¹⁹ This could only mean their status did not change.

Like the panics, accurate, illuminating documents popped up again in the ninth century. Jews were given considerable autonomy over their lives under Louis the Pious, much to the displeasure of Archbishops Agobard and Amolon, Agobard’s successor.”²⁰ Their writings, “almost all preserved intact, enable... [the discovery of] the status of the Jews in the Carolingian Empire” ... , Christians’ attitudes towards them...and “the specific reasons for the renewal of ecclesiastical hostility.”²¹ This shows that as time went on, the sophistication of documentation improved even if these archbishops did not record their writings for the sake of history, which shows their zeal even more. Agobard fiercely complained about the “sacrilegious fables that the Jews spread abroad concerning Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles.”²² If this is even remotely true, it should have made him realize his hypocrisy. Continuing with the myth of Jewish influence, he was disturbed by the dominion over people, but did not denounce Jews for heinous practices, merely “superstitions.”²³ There is a fine line here. The Church repeated falsehoods throughout the centuries to the point of preconception and subtle difference. It categorized Jews as different, apart, “and more than a simple infidel” when the Good Friday missal referring to the Jews was changed to “Do not genuflect to the Jews.”²⁴ Discrimination changed Christianity itself to accommodate it.

Antisemitism gained traction in the Early Middle Ages but not linearly. There were outbreaks and lulls. There were periods in some regions that were more peaceful than others. When

¹⁹ Poliakov, 28.

²⁰ Poliakov, 29.

²¹ Poliakov, 29.

²² Poliakov, 30-31.

²³ Poliakov, 31.

²⁴ Poliakov, 32.

Christianity became institutionalized, its leaders became obsessed with trying to advance it and with it their own influence. They spread ludicrous myths about the people in which their religion derived from that spread into every facet of European life — social, political, economic — until they were permanently ingrained in Christians' minds. The “repellent and/or ruinous qualities” Hayes discussed are fundamental in Christians' ancient attitude towards the Jewish people that had been echoed throughout the centuries by high profile people and reflected in events. This othering, this hate, has had terrible consequences that the world is now trying to grapple with. It was difficult to discuss the myths without also touching on the legislation, stereotypes, and scapegoating that ensued because it is all interconnected. The Church has had a hand in spreading hate and with it, chaos. There is a myriad of ways in which antisemitism has spread throughout history, but this period precedes them. With Christianity's establishment in the era before the Early Middle Ages, the stage was set for the perpetuation of antisemitism that only got worse as time went on.

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