

CHAPTER 2 THE PAN-EUROPEAN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Medieval Western Christendom spanned a vast area, and included a large number of peoples, languages, economies, political systems and cultures. Because of this, it is impossible to describe the history of the Jews in Medieval Latin Christendom as one story. For that reason, we need to discuss the Jews separately by their different locations. The one unifying institution was the Catholic Church. It had old and respected traditions about Jews and Judaism. Also, the Roman Catholic Church was the main institution that formulated the Christian doctrines and prescribed the right behavior for its followers.

This doesn't mean that there was consistency in doctrine, church policy or imagery of Judaism. For that, the Church was just too diverse. In this chapter, the focus will be on doctrine, policy and imagery of the Jews, mostly as brought forth by the different popes. The Church was not unanimous about these issues. Therefore, we will also address different positions within the church. Nonetheless, there were many aspects on which the church agreed concerning Judaism and the Jews.

We should also keep in mind that Church policies, doctrines and perceptions evolved throughout this period. This evolution had an important impact on the fate of Medieval Europe's Jews.

THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE

The teachings of St. Augustine concerning Jews were complex and incorporated all the ideas about Jews from the past. At the time, it offered a way for Roman emperor Constantine to deal with the Jewish minority in the Empire. Augustine combined mixed tendencies in his doctrine. On the one hand, it respected the Jews, on the other, it called for their denigration. On the one hand, the past played a role in this: It referred to the Jewish failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, their responsibility for the Crucifixion, and divine punishment through defeat of the Jews and their exile. At the same time, Augustine's teachings were oriented toward the *future* as well: Eventual Jewish acceptance of Christian truth and reconciliation with God. What was missing in his theory was how to deal with the Jews in the present. These matters were left to Church policy.

Prior to the year 1000, this complex and contradicting Augustinian teaching seemed to work theoretically, simply because there was hardly any Jewish presence in the lands of Catholicism. After the year 1000 however, Jewish presence in western Christendom began to grow. New issues came up. The growing presence of Jews was perceived as a danger to Christian identity. As a result, efforts to separate the Jews intensified; Christians found out more about Jewish teachings and practices; Jews became more involved in the economy; the Church developed more aggressive attempts to convert to Jews to Christianity, and finally, the perception of Jews as hostile and harmful spread and intensified. As a result, new policies regarding the Jews developed. Occasionally, these policies even led to a rethinking of the Augustinian doctrines about the place of Jews within Christian society.

One of the scholars who reexamined the Augustinian doctrine was Alexander of Hales in his *Summa Theologica*. Alexander was born in England and attended the University of Paris where he became a member of the faculty and joined the Franciscan Order. He was a recognized intellectual

thinker during the 13th century. In his theology, Alexander describes Judaism as having committed the sin of dishonoring God.

Alexander of Hales discussed the issue of Judaism, starting out from the long-accepted teachings of Augustine. In addition, Alexander addressed the many troubling issues that had emerged because of Jews living within the lands of Christianity. He uses those issues to reexamine the Augustinian point of view.

Alexander felt it was necessary to reexamine Augustine's position on the Jews because of new developments within Christendom and its Jewish population, and because of fuller knowledge of Judaism. He starts with giving arguments why Jews should not be tolerated.

Alexander had three reasons for not tolerating the Jews. The first reason was that the Jews cursed against Christ and the blessed Virgin. According to the Old Testament, when insulting God, blasphemers are subject to being killed. Therefore, Jews who act in this fashion should not be tolerated. Secondly, in the Talmud, some of the texts blasphemed Christ and the blessed Virgin. Alexander states, because the Talmud is what the Jewish people follow, they and their Talmud should be dispersed. Thirdly, as Christians rightfully persecute those pagans who occupy the Holy Land, they should likewise not tolerate those who have contempt for Jesus.

Alexander of Hales concluded that because of new developments that took place after Augustine, the Jews should not be tolerated in Christian society anymore. Augustine's ruling was not applicable anymore. Alexander instead based his teachings on the current realities of the Jewish minority as perceived by most Christians within western Christendom. We shall now look at his three arguments a bit closer.

We begin with Alexander's third argument against toleration of Judaism and Jews. It can be found in the way the crusades were perceived, which had started in the late eleventh century. In 1095, Pope Urban II had called upon the warriors of western Christendom to free the sacred sites of Christianity from the Muslims. It is certain that his call did not mention Jews, and he did not intend any implications for the Jews.

As a result of this call, armies were formed to battle against the Muslims. For some of these armies, but certainly not for all of them, the call to battle implied the Jews as well. There is an anti-Jewish crusader slogan that is mentioned in both Christian and Jewish sources. It says: "Behold we travel to a distant land to battle with the kings of that land. We take our lives in our hands in order to conquer all those kingdoms that do not believe in the crucified. How much more should we continue to do so against the Jews, who murdered and crucified him." This reflected popular reasoning at the time of crusades but was opposed by the Church at the beginning of the Second Crusade. Bernard of Clairvaux preached against it. However, here in his *Summa Theologica*, Alexander revives the popular notion. Even though Alexander is not calling for mass violence against the Jews, he is still posing a provocative case: Christians legitimately prosecute the Muslims who deny Christ. Jews are at least as bad, if not worse than Muslims in their contempt for Christ. Therefore, treatment of the Jews should be at least as harsh as the treatment of the Muslims. For Alexander, this meant the non-toleration of Jews and Judaism.

Alexander's first argument against tolerating the Jews had to do with the threat of the Islamic world against Christian society. In addition to the perception of this *outside* threat, the Jews were now seen as enemies of Christianity from *within*. This perceived danger was connected to Christians' beliefs

that Jews blasphemed against Jesus and Mary, that they abused Christian holy objects, and that they oppressed Christians and even murdered their Christian neighbors.

Alexander refers to the *Decretales*, a collection of papal rulings. A section on Muslims and Jews contains references to Jewish hostility and blasphemy. Several examples are taken from the letters of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) such as: 1) If people (i.e. Jews) insult the Creator or Christ, they should be punished. 2) Certain people (Jews) poke fun at Christians who mourn the death of Jesus in the days before Eastern. 3) On Eastern Sunday, after Christian women who nurse the Jewish children, consume the host and wine which are the body and blood of Christ, the Jews make them pour their milk in the latrines for three days before they can nurse again.

Alexander uses such allegations to suggest that the Jews be recognized as blasphemers. As blasphemy was punishable by death under biblical law, Alexander asserts that Jews should not be tolerated in Christian society.

Alexander's middle argument for the non-toleration of Judaism and Jews was the last to develop. It wasn't until the 12th century, when Christian thinkers spread awareness to the role of the Talmud in Jewish life. At first, the purpose of this was mostly to criticize and ridicule those who were guided by the Talmud. Yet during the 1230s, Nicholas Donin (a convert from Judaism to Christianity) showed up at the papal court claiming that the Talmud contained things that were intolerable in Christian society. He was ordered to closely examine the Talmud in order to clarify whether the charges were accurate; and if so, harsh steps would be necessary.

The pope's appeal to the clergy and secular authorities of the Western Christendom created a major response in France. Large amounts of Talmud manuscripts were confiscated in 1240 and were subjected to close examination. Translations of the Talmud were organized into sets of accusations which brought about charges, such as cursing towards Jesus and Mary, and requiring anti-Christian activities. Northern-French rabbis served as witnesses in a trial. This trial ended with the Talmud being pronounced sentenced. In 1242, copies of the Talmud and other rabbinic writings were publicly burning in Paris.

In this second argument, Alexander argued for intolerance of Jews by specifically referencing issues of blasphemy in the Talmud. In his first argument, he quoted papal letters, but here he could take evidence directly from Jewish text. He feels that since Jews think of the Talmud as law, they cannot discount the evidence of blasphemy that he points out there.

Alexander's approach was strong as his case was made by using ideas and realities from contemporary medieval society. This helped him undermine the Augustinian position which grounded in the past and future.

Alexander now tests his three statements against the teachings of Augustine. He brings forth three claims. The first and last are parallel, they both cite similar Bible verses. The first is a quote from the Psalms (59:12) "Slay them not, lest my people forget". This was already interpreted by Augustine as meaning that the Jews had to be dispersed, so that they had the possibility to convert. Other verses from Isaiah 22:10 and Romans 11:5 were taken to mean that a remnant of the Jews will one day repent and return to God. This would mean they must be tolerated so that they can convert in the future. The middle claim repeats the teaching of Augustine that the Jews testify of the holiness of Scripture. This was another reason why they should be tolerated. However, while reaching this conclusion Alexander has brought forth a strong case for anti-Jewish measurements.

Referring to the Crusades, Alexander points out that the Muslims occupy the Holy Land and defile its sacred place. Clearly, the Jews do not do this, and therefore the benefits of tolerating them outweigh the risks. Of course, if they openly offend Christ, they are to be punished. On another note, some Jewish blasphemy comes from the belief that the Messiah hasn't come yet. If Jews go beyond this simple rejection and proceed to insult Jesus or Mary or Christian holy objects, then they deserve punishment. As far as the Talmud is guilty of blasphemy, it should be destroyed. In short, Alexander believes that there are Jewish anti-Christian attitudes and behavior. Where this exists, it must be rooted out. For those Jews, willing to live in a Christian society and behave appropriately, the old Augustinian reasons to tolerate them are still valid.

We have focused on Alexander of Hales because he shows us how the Christian perception of Jews was changing, based on experience with Jews, and clashed with the old Augustinian view of Jews. While the old view remained as a theory, the new approach emphasized being watchful of the Jews. If they behaved peacefully and harmlessly, the tolerant Augustinian view would still ensure their safety in society. However, if they proved harmful, they must be punished on an individual or group level.

An important document called *Constitutio pro Judeis* is a statement of Jewish rights issued by several popes. It embodies the Augustinian position but also reflects practical policies towards the Jews. Thus it serves as a bridge between theological principles and practical policy, including aspects of both. The heart of the document lies in a formula introduced by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century: "Just as license ought not to be granted to the Jews to presume to do in their synagogues more than the law permits them, just so ought they not suffer curtailment of those things which have been conceded to them." This fundamental statement on Jewish rights is meant to serve as a preamble, or an introduction, to the key protections that Jews should have. However, it does not explain why these rights are deserved; it simply states them.

While this is the introduction of the earliest versions of the *Constitutio*, the powerful Pope Innocent III, known for a number of violent outbursts against Jewish presumed blasphemy, expanded the older version and added a new introduction and a new closing statement to the document. The new introduction reads as follows: "Although the Jewish perfidy is in every way worthy of condemnation, nevertheless - because through them the truth of our own faith is proven - they are not to be severely oppressed by the faithful. Thus, the prophet says: 'Do not slay them, lest they forget your law.' Put more sharply, you must not destroy totally the Jews, so that the Christians will not be able to forget your law, which they - although they do not understand it - display in their books to those who do understand." This is, again, the Augustinian view, but it is expressed in an unusually bitter and negative manner.

The new closing reinforces the negativity of the introduction: "We wish to place under protection of this decree only those who have not dared to plot against the Christian faith." This foreshadows the teachings of Alexander of Hales. Jews had the potential to do harm to Christians. The Augustinian toleration of Jews only applies to those who live peacefully and harmlessly within Christendom. Following the year 1000, Christian belief in Jewish anti-Christian behavior increased, which changed the theoretical guarantees extended by the Augustine.