

CHAPTER 2 THE PAN-EUROPEAN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL CREATIVITY: DANGER, CHALLENGE, STIMULUS

So far, we have focused on Church doctrine, policies and imagery related to Judaism. These had a profound influence on Jews. But there was another source of Christian influence on the Jews of the west. The period 1000-1500 showed remarkable cultural and spiritual creativity in areas like science, philosophy, architecture, literature, visual arts, and the founding of new European universities. Especially in the 12th century, these innovations were so remarkable that scholars call this period a “renaissance”. Most of this creativity came forth from the Christian religious outlook. Sometimes however, the Church saw certain innovations as heretical. Identifying and destroying heresy became a major concern of the Church. In any case, all this creativity affected the Jews who lived in this environment.

This new cultural and spiritual blossoming posed new threats to the identity of the Jews. Christians felt that their religion which had brought forth such a vigorous new culture must be superior, and other religions inferior. Strengthened by this, missionary activity was intensified.

This Christian creativity resulted in new efforts in winning over the Jews. First and foremost, of course, old-fashioned argumentation from the Hebrew Bible. That strategy can be traced back to the beginning of Christianity. Over time, Christians became more aware of the Jewish tradition of Bible interpretation. With the advanced development of biblical scholarship in the 12th and 13th centuries, those seeking to convert the Jews became convinced that the true meaning of the text could be detected and that this would convince the Jews.

Others focused on philosophy to prove the truth of Christianity. This approach also goes back to the early days of Christianity. Justin Martyr had been one of the Church’s first philosophers and at the same time one of its first influential defenders. However, Thomas Aquinas’s effort to prove Christianity through philosophy had little impact on medieval Jews and Muslims; his synthesis was too complicated to serve as a convincing tool. Nonetheless, it still shows how confident Christians were that philosophic achievements validated the Christian truth.

A new effort to acquire knowledge from the world outside Christianity also had an impact on missionizing strategies. Religious texts of other traditions were translated. These translations then were used as tools for converting people to Christianity. In targeting the Jews, missionaries argued that the rabbinic texts supported the Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.

For example, traditionally, Christians used Isaiah 52-53 and claimed that the Suffering Servant of the Lord described in that text referred to Jesus. Jews rejected this claim and argued that the Isaiah passage depicted the persecution of Jews, not the Messiah. Now the missionaries were able to cite

rabbinic passages that also took Isaiah 52-53 as a portrayal of the Messiah, thereby countering the standard medieval Jewish view, while supporting Christian claims.

Beside Jewish explanations of Bible texts, other rabbinic sources were cited as proof of Christian truths, such as that the Messiah had already come or that the one God had multiple personas. Jewish leaders did come up with responses, but these attacks on Jewish beliefs – creatively using Jewish sources – were quite powerful.

The most impactful Christian argument however was that Christianity had become dominant and that the Jews were living in a humiliated position. This was obviously proof that God had favored the Church and abandoned the Jewish people. Jewish spokespeople did try to counter this argument, but it was nonetheless felt as a troubling point.

Aside from these specific attacks created by Christianity's cultural creativity, a more general challenge was posed. As we saw before, one of the most powerful Christian arguments for Jewish conversion was taken from practical realities. Jews were reminded of the remarkable difference between the rise and dominance of Christianity and Jewish decline. This would suggest divine acceptance of Christianity and divine rejection of Judaism. Generally, proofs of Christian dominance and Jewish decline were taken from the physical world: demography, economy, and political power. Jews did have answers to these claims and argued that the material achievements of Christendom were no proof of spiritual truth. Of course, they could not acknowledge cultural or spiritual inferiority. Thus, Christian cultural and spiritual achievement challenged the Jews to develop their own cultural creativity, one that would match or – at least in Jewish eyes – exceed Christian achievement.

We see this Jewish feeling of being superior in the violent attacks on the Jews in the Rhineland that were a part of the First Crusade. Those Jews who recorded the events felt no need to portray the motives of the violent crusaders as evil or low. They agreed that the crusaders were moved by spiritual values, be it that these were blemished by the Christian faith. They agreed that the crusaders were driven by heroism, be it that this heroism was tainted by the crusaders' empty beliefs. They recognized the crusaders' exalted desire towards Jerusalem, even though the crusaders were only concerned with the physical Jerusalem. It was the Jewish martyrs who built a *spiritual* Jerusalem in the Rhineland. It was the Jews who were the real heroes. This was in fact the opposite of the Christian perception, in which the Jews were the Israel of the flesh, and the Christians the new Israel of the spirit.

We see a similar competition from the new style of Jewish Bible interpretation. As Christians became more focused on explaining the Bible text in a literal way, they turned to the Jews for deeper study of the Hebrew language. As a direct response, Jews then also focused on the literal sense of the Biblical text, convinced that they were much better at it than the Christians. This is how, confronted with a new style of Christian Bible study, the Jews worked in the same direction, claiming to be more successful at it.

Besides these previously described areas in which Jews tried to match and surpass Christians, there are remarkable similarities between new ways in which Christians studied and applied Church law and innovative ways in which Jews studied the Talmud. Such a new approach to Talmud study emerged in the early 12th century in northern France.

Philosophic interest first emerged in the Muslim world, where it enticed the Jews to embrace philosophy as well. The height of this philosophical thinking is found in the works of Maimonides. The philosophical tradition that initially flourished in the Muslim world, eventually spread to Christian society, including to its Jewish communities. In the Jewish perception, Christian philosophy was superficial and irrational, while Jewish philosophy was a natural outgrowth of the rationality and logic of Judaism.

Most interesting is the development of Jewish mysticism. While forms of Jewish mysticism had existed since Biblical times, in Christian lands where mystical beliefs were deeply ingrained in society, it received a major boost from the 12th century onward. The appearance of the *Zohar* in the late 13th century fits very well in the trend of this period. Both Christian and Jewish mystical thinking was focused on bridging the gap between humans and the Divinity, and on discerning multiple aspects and dynamic features within the one God. At the same time, Jewish mystics were persistent in their criticism of Christianity, blaming it for much of the evil in the world. Here again, Jews followed what was going on in the dominant society, and at the same time encouraged to point out the errors of Christianity and the superiority of the Jewish vision.

Up until this point, the Christian-Jewish relationship has been described as hostile, with the Jewish minority challenged by the Christian majority, and asserting its dominance. However, in medieval western Christian society, much of Jewish creativity simply came from living in a dynamic and exciting environment.