

INTRODUCTION

ROBERT CHAZAN

Historians writing from the perspective of the modern West have usually defined the “Middle Ages” as the period between 500 and 1500 and as the epoch during which the Church controlled the major directions taken by the societies of Christendom. The Renaissance thinkers who initially coined the locution and those moderns who subsequently made its usage common were very much focused on Europe and were profoundly hostile to the medieval epoch. The notion of a “middle” period in European history was meant to conjure up the greatness of the earlier Greco-Roman era, the decline fostered by the victory of Christianity and the Church, and the anticipated revitalization of Europe in the spirit of Greece and Rome. The “Middle” of the Middle Ages was a term of opprobrium.

That opprobrium was heightened during the Enlightenment, when “medieval” came to symbolize all the ills against which Enlightenment thinkers railed – dictatorial ecclesiastical powers, obscurantist religious views, and suppression of innovative and creative thinking. Intense Enlightenment castigation of medieval civilization and its achievements eventually stimulated a Romantic reaction that projected onto the Middle Ages the enduring virtues seemingly absent in the new, more secular, and more democratic era.

With the passage of time, ideologically grounded opprobrium and its opposite – adulation of the medieval Church and medieval society – have both given way to more scholarly distance and to the recognition that the “Middle Ages” produced highly creative and constructive achievements, along with much that was harmful and destructive. The broadening of recent scholarly interests beyond the borders of Europe has enlarged perspectives on the “Middle Ages,” especially through the growing awareness that European Christendom was by no means the sole or even the dominant force on the Western scene during much of the period bounded by 500 and 1500. Scholars have become increasingly aware of the extent to which the “Middle Ages” reflect a Eurocentric perspective, and of the difficulties in applying the notion outside Europe. Recognition of the

range and power of the medieval Islamic world has been one of the most significant elements in this newer and broader sense of the Middle Ages.

During the seventh century, an unanticipated new religious vision and force emerged from the Arabian peninsula. Muslim armies conquered vast territories, stretching from central Asia westward to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, across North Africa, and onto the European continent. Within this enormous area, Muslim rulers built effectively on the foundations of prior civilizations, absorbed much of the learning and wisdom of the Greco-Roman world, and fashioned multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies of great terrestrial power and equally great intellectual and spiritual vitality. This vast Islamicate realm included the overwhelming majority of the world's Jewish population from the seventh century through the early centuries of the second Christian millennium. The concentration of the world's Jewish population and creativity in the orbit of Islam during this period is reflected in the decision to devote the bulk of volume 5 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism* to Jewish communities and Jewish life under Islamic rule during the Middle Ages.

During the first half of the Middle Ages, the Christian sphere of political power was divided into two sectors. In Asia Minor, the venerable Eastern Roman Empire maintained its authority and creativity, grounded in the teachings of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Byzantine Empire set limits to the Islamic conquest along the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Further westward, the Roman Church provided essential coherence to the diverse principalities of Latin Christendom. While western Christian armies were eventually successful in halting the Muslim advance across Europe, Latin Christendom suffered grievous losses and emerged as the weakest of the three major religio-political blocs of the first half of the Middle Ages. Buffeted from every direction – by Muslim forces, by Byzantium, and by raiding parties from the north – the rulers of Western Christendom during the first half of the Middle Ages were constantly on the defensive, seeking as best they could to protect their clients and followers from the multitude of dangers threatening from all quarters.

Just as the rise of Islam and the Islamic conquests could not have been foretold during the sixth century, so too the vitalization of Western Christendom could not have been predicted during the tenth century. Modern scholars are not at all certain as to the explanations for the reversal of position that enabled Latin Christendom to evolve from the weakest of the Western blocs to the strongest. The vitalization was more than simply military. Beginning in the tenth century, the population of Western Christendom grew rapidly, its economic productivity expanded, urban life developed impressively, effective governments emerged, the Church became ever better organized, and wide-ranging cultural and spiritual

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creativity crystallized. There was an underside to all this as well. Recent scholars have highlighted major shortcomings in medieval Latin Christendom, including the tendencies toward militarism and especially toward societal uniformity, with dissident groups of all kinds marginalized and often severely persecuted. The vitalization of Latin Christendom – negative aspects notwithstanding – bore enormous implications for Western history in general and for world Jewry in particular.

During the second half of the Middle Ages, increasingly large Jewish populations emerged in Western Christendom, transforming its Jewish communities from a minuscule element on the world Jewish scene to the eventual majority of world Jewry. In part, the growth of Europe's Jewish population was a by-product of Christian military successes. As Christian armies began to eliminate Islamic principalities from European soil, especially on the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, Jews faced the difficult decision as to whether to remain in place and accept Christian rule or to retreat southward with their former Muslim overlords. Most of these southern European Jews seem to have chosen the former course, much encouraged by the enticements proffered by the new Christian rulers in order to convince them to remain and contribute to rebuilding the economy of the conquered areas.

More striking was the decision of other Jews to leave the realm of Islam and settle in the expanding and maturing principalities of southern Europe. Thus, the Jewish communities of southern Europe were further reinforced by a wave of co-religionists drawn by the economic opportunities in rapidly developing Western Christendom.

More important yet was the decision of some southern European Jews to abandon older areas of Jewish settlement and to settle in northern France and Germany, where serious Jewish life had never before taken root. Northern Europe was, in many ways, at the forefront of the process of vitalization, and some Jews accurately sensed the dynamism of the area. Once again, there was more involved than Jewish initiative. Here, too, far-sighted rulers recognized the benefits that Jewish settlers might bring with them, especially the economic expertise drawn from experience in the more advanced sectors of the early medieval West. These northern rulers – like their Christian counterparts in the south in the wake of the Christian conquests – attracted Jewish settlers by conferring upon them promises of physical safety and economic support. The overtures of northern European rulers and the positive response of their Jewish clients resulted in the emergence of entirely new Jewish settlements, indeed of an entirely new branch of the Jewish people, destined for remarkable growth during the closing centuries of the Middle Ages and into modernity.

The circumstances these new Jewish settlers encountered were complex. Many of the rulers of northern France and Germany, concerned for the

economic development of their realms, welcomed and supported them, while at the same time often exploiting them harshly. The Church maintained its traditional ambivalence. On the one hand, the Church remained committed to the Augustinian tradition of allowing Jews to live in safety and security within Christian society. Indeed, the Augustinian tradition saw positive value in the Jews' presence within Christian society. On the other hand, the medieval Church – like earlier ecclesiastical leadership – was deeply concerned over the damage that Jews might inflict on Christian host societies. This concern triggered extensive ecclesiastical legislation designed to protect Christianity and Christians from harmful Jewish influences.

The third element in society – the populace at large – tended to be strongly negative, exhibiting little of the ambivalence of the secular and ecclesiastical authorities. For the populace at large, the immigrating Jews were newcomers and elicited the hostility that is the normal lot of newcomers in all societies and all ages. The immigrants were not just newcomers but Jews as well, and this evoked powerful Gospel imagery of unrelenting Jewish opposition to Jesus, and the central Jewish role in bringing about his crucifixion. For many of the townfolk of northern Europe, Jews were also competitors equipped with the numerous and vexing advantages that the political authorities conferred. Finally, many in northern Europe perceived the immigrating Jews as agents of change – which they in fact were. Since societal change is normally feared and hated, these Jewish agents of change became the targets of much anxiety and loathing. The multi-faceted popular resistance to the newly settling Jews created potent obstacles to normal social and economic integration.

Despite this complicated and problematic situation, the new Jewish settlers ultimately put down effective roots in both northern France and Germany. They soon struck out in further directions as well, moving westward during the eleventh century from northern France into England, where a small but important Jewry was founded and grew. Somewhat later, German Jews headed eastward into the late-blooming sectors of eastern Europe, where an increasingly large set of Jewish communities was established. By the end of the Middle Ages, the Jews of Latin Christendom were approaching numerical equality with the older Jewish communities of the Islamic world. During the modern period, the Jewry of Europe and its offshoots would become the dominant demographic element in the Jewish people worldwide.

Organizing a volume devoted to this emergent and rapidly developing European Jewry is no easy matter. On the one hand, the overall objective of such a volume is to convey a coherent sense of the Jews, Jewish communities, and Judaism of Western Christendom during the second

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half of the Middle Ages. There was in fact a measure of coherence in Latin Christendom, provided by the authority of the Roman Church. Nonetheless, despite the unity the Roman Church provided, Latin Christendom was a vast and sprawling area that encompassed diverse climates, varied ethnic communities with divergent histories and traditions, and multiple languages and cultures. Genuine homogeneity all across Western Christendom was impossible under these circumstances. Moreover, the time period covered – 1000 through 1500 – includes a series of phases that proceeded from early development through rapid maturation to periodic decline and revival. Putting the disparities of space and time together, there were striking differences between the Jewish communities of twelfth-century Spain and those of twelfth-century northern France, and equally striking differences between these two sets of Jews and those of fourteenth-century Poland and Hungary.

The volume has been organized in such a way as to combine the desire for coherence with acknowledgment of diversity. The first section, entitled “Jews in the Medieval Christian World,” begins with a focus on the homogeneous aspects of Latin Christendom – Church doctrines and policies, and broad perceptions of one another held by Christians and Jews. The rest of this section is devoted to the separate geographic areas of Latin Christendom, beginning in the Mediterranean south where Jewish settlement was oldest, proceeding to the northwest sectors of Europe where Jewish life thrived for a period of time and then declined precipitously, and then on to central and eastern Europe where the curve of Jewish life was flatter, lacking rapid growth but lacking also sudden and decisive decline and termination.

The second and third sections of the volume are organized topically, with an initial focus on social and institutional history followed by spiritual and intellectual developments. The authors of the chapters in these latter two sections of the volume have remained fully attuned to the tension between broad and overarching themes on the one hand, and geographical and chronological diversity on the other. It is our hope that readers will emerge with a sense of both aspects of Jewish existence: the common characteristics of Jewish life throughout medieval Western Christendom, and the unique features of Jewish experience in the diverse sectors of Latin Christendom and during the alternative phases in the evolving history of this rapidly developing civilization.