

# The Jews in Christian Europe: Aspects of the Process of Religious Tolerance

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## ***Abstract***

*The position of the Jews in the European societies in the course of history is taken as an indicator to confirm the thesis that tolerance is not the product of the rational development of mankind, or heritage of the enlightenment, but the product of a concrete constellation of circumstances in a society, the consequence of the dominant attitude of the majority community in regard to the benefit or harm to their own wellbeing that a minority community might bring, in this case the Jewish one. In this article we have adopted Dimont's categorization of the history of the Jews in medieval Europe which is divided into three periods: the first, which began to crystalize in the sixth century and lasted until the eleventh; the second, encompassing the two centuries of the Crusades and the ensuing two centuries of the Renaissance; and the third, starting with the Reformation and stretching for a period of three hundred years, from 1500 to 1800.*

***Key words:*** Jews, Christians, tolerance, non-tolerance

Benjamin Kaplan, a researcher in development of religious tolerance in the European countries during the Reformation period, came to the conclusion that tolerance (including religious tolerance) represents a heritage of the enlightenment. He perceived tolerance as an aspect of the ideal proposed by the Enlightenment thinkers and of the rational development of mankind, analogous to the individual human development. The conclusion of this perception is that tolerance appears when the rational development of mankind reaches a certain level and that the further evolution of rationality in people would condition its further development. Still, at the end of his research Kaplan himself doubts this conclusion, and this doubt is also shared by other researchers previously supporting the same concept. (Kaplan, 2007:11)

The development of religious non-tolerance in the twentieth century call for a review of the Enlightenment concept of tolerance, whereby it begins to be recognized not as an invention of the intellectual elite living in religiously mixed communities, but as a practice of people in general, as a social practice encouraged

by the interaction of people of different religions, having complex relations with the ideals as well as the official policy (Zagorin, 2003: 299-311). The history of the Jews in the European countries is presented as an indicator that tolerance is not an enlightening invention but a social practice conditioned by concrete circumstances in a society in a certain historical period.

The Jewish theology does not provide bases for development of tolerance towards the others by the members of the Jewish community. According to the Judaistic system, the entire mankind is divided into two categories - non-Jews (gentiles) and Jews, and the former have divine protection proportionately to the extent of their obeying Jehovah's laws - they can change but they do not do it (Neusner: 2008,196, 201).<sup>1</sup> The Jews do not approve of any other religion because "God of Israel is the only true God and the Israelite mode of worship is the only divinely sanctioned method of worship", and in accordance with this "all other worship is an error and subject to God's punishment". (Avery-Peck, 2008: 218). To the Jews, the differences between them and the others are so huge that they leave no space for theological tolerance of the others (Avery-Peck, 2008: 218). Yet, the concrete living conditions, sharing the same space and the inevitability of realizing economic relations with the others brought about harmonization of the religious provisions with the demands of everyday life. For instance, "Israelites are obliged by God to display a fundamental level of civil behavior toward pagans in order to assure peaceful relationships". Thus, they come to the following definition of tolerance: "Tolerance means to tolerate the presence of - indeed, to coexist with and benefit from the presence of - non-Israelites in the Israelites' social and economic sphere" (Avery-Peck, 2008: 231, 233).

When they became part of the Roman Empire and the era of the Diaspora started, the Jews formulated several laws of self-rule necessary for their survival in a world where other religions and other social norms dominate: 1) No Jew should ever have to obey a Jewish law which was beyond the power of a religious Jew to observe. If such a law, which had been workable in one generation, proved unworkable in another, then that law would have to be repealed or re-interpreted; 2) Jews must recognize the validity of a non-Jewish document in both a Jewish and non-Jewish court, and that all oaths taken in any court, in any language, were valid;

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning to Bernar Lewis this classification has more in common with the Greek notion of barbarian than with the Christian and Islamic concept of the unbeliever (Lewis, 1996: 206-207)

3) all laws of a country in which Jews resided had to be obeyed, so long as they did not arbitrarily forbid a religious practice, force them to practice incest, worship idols, or commit murder; and 4) Jews must fight in the defense of the country wherein they lived, even if it meant fighting against fellow Jews in another country at a time of war (Dimont, 2003: 120). In the following two millennia, these laws secured the survival of the Jews as a people with their own religion that spread over a wide territory and encountered various social situations.

The Jews, namely, built mechanisms to survive in various environments. However, these environments did not have unique, clearly defined and constant rules for their acceptance. Particularly the attitude toward them in the countries in which the Christian population dominated, varied in different circumstances.

Within the Roman Empire, the Jews had communities in a large number of cities where they lived in peace with the Christian population until the old Roman order was replaced by the Christian one. They gained the right to citizenship in 212, under Emperor Aurelius Antoninus (Caracalla) guaranteed not only their equality but also the status of citizens. That status changed when Christianity acquired the status of a state religion. As the power of Christianity grew the Jews gradually became an unfit, minority group that could not be a part of the Christian community. The Christian communities began to perform actions such as forced baptism and persecution of those who resisted such pressures. Despite the efforts of some Christian fathers (e.g. Gregory the Great) to respect the citizen rights of the Jews, the process of non-tolerance toward them advanced at a rate proportional to the growth of the power of the Christian community.

Emperor Constantine, in recognizing the Christian Church, withdrew some of the civil rights of the Jews, but did not revoke their citizenship. Julian, who revoked Christianity and restored paganism, restored these privileges in 361. He even promised help in rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple. When he died, as Dimont puts it, "with him died the fears of the Christians and the hopes of the Jews" (Dimont, 2003: 151).

Yet, in the first centuries after acquiring the status of a state religion, the Christians did not pay much attention to the Jews. "In the ensuing three hundred years after the death of Constantine, the Christians were far too occupied fighting the battle of heretical creeds and godless barbarians to pay much heed to the Jews, who minded their own business" (Dimont, 2003: 150). However, even then discriminatory laws were passed in relation to non-Christian religions, including the Jewish: the Law of Constantine the Great of 315; the Laws of Constantius of 399, forbidding intermarriage between Jewish men and Christian women; the Laws of Theodosius II (439) prohibiting Jews from holding high positions in

government; the Laws of Justinian (531), prohibiting Jews from appearing as witnesses against Christians (Dimont, 2003: 153). The purpose of these laws was to protect the new religion from the competition with other religions, and also to protect key posts for its believers. Judaism was particularly attractive for the slaves because under the Law of Moses they earned their freedom after seven years of servitude, which resulted in a ban against Jews possessing slaves; the prohibition of intermarriage was imposed due to the reputation of Jewish men to provide good education for their children, which did not worry the Jews much as they too had previously brought a law which forbade intermarriage. The prohibition for holding high positions in government was conditioned by the low education of the Christian population and the good education of the Jews, but in practice this prohibition was often ignored and so did not have significant discriminatory effects.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, when the barbaric peoples occupied the empire and began to build a new order, the Jews continued to spread along the Rhine and the Danube, and settled in Bohemia, Switzerland and in many Italian cities. The most significant Jewish centre was still in Spain, where the Moorish kings managed to create a splendid culture (Папк, 1932:22). The new barbarian states in relation to the Jews retained some of the Roman laws, but also passed new ones. Thus, in the Visigothic legislation the Jews were treated as Roman citizens, but these were divided in two groups: Catholics and Jews, and for the latter the law was narrowed from 53 down to 10 regulations. As time passed, in Spain the privileges were gradually diminished for the Roman citizens and they were exposed to many social and legal difficulties. In the laws of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (*Lex Romana Curiensis*) they were no longer treated as Roman citizens (Katz, 1937: 83). In the Carolingian period the Jews were considered as foreigners with no legal rights. The king could provide a certain protection for them, individual or collective, but legally he was not bound to such an act.

After the year of 600 A.D., the Jews found themselves in the framework of three emerging civilizations and in each of them different fates awaited them: "a sterile cultural death and physical expulsion awaited them in the Byzantine Empire; a brilliant intellectual career was in store for them in the Islamic world; sorrow and greatness was their lot in feudal Europe" (Dimont, 2003: 155).

Dimont divides the medieval history of the Jews in Europe in three periods: the first, which began to crystallize in the sixth century and lasted until the eleventh; the second, encompassing the two centuries of the Crusades and the

ensuing two centuries of the Renaissance; and the third, starting with the Reformation and stretching for a period of three centuries, from 1500 to 1800.

The history of the Byzantine Empire reveals that its emperors, starting with Constantine the Great and onwards, occasionally passed laws against the Jews, but soon revoked them because the feudal society had not developed a merchant class of its own, and the Jews were the ones who did the trading activity. The Roman Church also imposed numerous prohibitions ranging from the pronouncement of Gregory the Great in the eighth century forbidding the forcible conversion of Jews, to the decree of Pope Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that the Jews wear a yellow badge. But basically the Jews enjoyed relative liberty and achieved prosperity during this time. The humiliating prohibitions began after the eleventh century. "The humiliating garb, ritual-murder charges and confinement to the ghetto were not the heritage of the early Dark Ages but the heritage of the Crusades, the Renaissance and the Reformation" (Dimont, 2003: 220)

At the end of the eleventh century, with the onset of the Crusades began the centuries-long difficult period of Jewish persecution. These wars instigated hatred among the masses against the Jews". The question was raised whether it was the Christian knights' duty to risk their lives in order to free the Grave of God from the infidels' hands, while his murderers live in safety among the Christians" (Папк, 1932:23). Christian began to preach that it was better for Jews to convert to Christianity than be killed (even the Visigothic King of Spain, Sisebut, applied the system: baptism, death or exile). The demand for conversion during the Crusades prompted new migrations to territories away from the paths of the Crusaders into Poland, England, Italy (Lowney, 2006).

The following centuries were a period of growing anti-Semitism - the frames of the Jewish life began to narrow: physically the Jews were confined to the ghetto, legally - they were deprived of the right to do many activities, and morally - they were exposed to incessant harassment, and their books were being destroyed (Папк, 1932: 24).

In some countries better conditions for life of the Jews lasted much longer. In England they enjoyed peace up to the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the period of exiles started and ended in 1290 with their complete expulsion. In France the periods of tolerance and persecution alternated until their exile in 1394. Sometimes the Jews were banished by the king, and the nobility gave them shelter, at other times the situation was reverse. In Germany, where there was no strong central government, the attitude towards the Jews was different in every city and in every dukedom. Still, it became worse everywhere, so that at the end of the Middle

Ages Jews remained only in several cities (their main communities were in Frankfurt, Prague and Vienna) (Папк, 1932: 25).

The position of the Jews drastically deteriorated with Inquisition. It was instituted in the context of the war against the Albigensian heresy, which spread in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the south of France. Considering that the death sentence involved confiscation of property, very soon the hunt for heretics became a very profitable business, and this instigated the Holy See to turn the individual hunt for heretics into an institutional hunt by the Church. The hunt was directed at Christians. In Spain its greatest victims became the Jews who had accepted Christianity and were called Marranos. The social rise of these forcibly converted Jews, their wealth, holding of top administrative positions, but also top positions in the Catholic hierarchy, provoked envy among the native Christian population, which propelled the Spanish Inquisition in 1482 to focus on the Marranos. When they were exterminated, Torquemada, the Spanish Inquisitor who was confessor to Queen Isabella, convinced her of the necessity to expel from Spain the Jews who had not converted because they were a danger to the Catholic faith. Previously, the same request has been sent to the Pope and refused by him, but Isabella, after some hesitation, succumbed to the pressure and together with her husband, King Ferdinand, signed the Edict of Exile (1492 - the same year when they signed the act for Columbus' voyage which led to the discovery of America). Of the 150,000 Jews in Spain at that time, an estimated 50,000, whose Spanish ancestry dated back for fifteen hundred years, did not want to leave their homeland and paid the price for staying, conversion to Christianity. Of the remaining 100,000, some 10,000 perished, about 45,000 eventually settled in Turkey, approximately 15,000 in North Africa and Egypt, 10,000 in southern France and Holland, 10,000 in northern Italy and 5,000 in South America (Dimont, 2003: 229; Katz, 1937: 47-49; Lowney, 2006: 227-246, ).

The Inquisition against the Marranos in Portugal was instituted in 1496, forcing them to settle in North Africa, the northern Italian states and the Ottoman Empire. Many Marranos who remained in Spain and Portugal moved to Holland and South America in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

After the Jews had been banished from Spain and Portugal, the Inquisition turned against Moors converted to Christianity, who were expelled from Spain in 1502. It was then that the Christians became victims of the Inquisition and it was active in Europe during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with incomparably many more Christians falling victim than Jews or Muslims.

The Jews who settled in North Africa, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire enjoyed almost complete religious freedom for several centuries. In the Ottoman Empire their main centers were Istanbul and Thessaloniki.<sup>2</sup> Here, with the knowledge of European languages and conditions, the first generation of Jews served in the customs administration and, as interpreters at the government level and for various European embassies. Later, in these functions, they were replaced by Greeks and Armenians (Lewis, 2004: 24).

By correlating the economic history of Christian Europe with the position of the Jews in Europe, Dimont concludes that they were in an inverse relationship: "As the material welfare of the Christians during this period took a turn for the better, that of the Jews took a turn for the worse" (Dimont, 2003:230). He explains this with the effects of the simple economic laws: when feudal men realized the superiority of the Jewish way of work, they learned from what they were doing and eliminated competition by kicking them out and taking their positions. They left their feudal ghettos, took over all the posts previously held by Jews and closed them in the Jewish ghetto.

The two things that played an essential role in the transformation of medieval Europe into a modern civilization - the Crusades and the Renaissance - concurrently had a significant impact on the change of the position of the Jews. The Crusades set the peasants free from serfdom, whereas the Renaissance freed the mind of man from dogma and scholasticism. "The freed serfs settled in towns and changed their occupations from tillers of the soil to producers and sellers of goods. They sold these goods in free markets at a profit. This had been the function of the Jews previously. This shift in Christian occupation marked the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism. All qualities which helped in this exchange of goods for money at a profit became good qualities, everything that impeded this exchange became bad qualities. The marketplace, not the Church, now determined morality" (Dimont, 2003: 234-235).

The Jews in the European countries performed many activities that required higher education and professional skills, which later formed the basis of the capitalist system (Lewis, 2004: 54). The feudal system of West Europe actually directed them to such professions. They did not belong to any of the three estates, and without a defined role in the system, they turned towards commerce, industry and the professions. They worked at universities, especially in the departments of

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<sup>2</sup> During the 16-th century Thessaloniki became a big Jewish center – 60% of his inhabitants were Jews (Мантрап, 1999: 146).

philosophy, medicine and mathematics. They were doctors and bankers. The latter, banking, was the area where they most prospered. This orientation toward banking was prompted by the Christian viewing of lending money as usury (although the interest percentage did not exceed 3%), and also as a result of how this was regulated in the Jewish laws. The Talmud regulated lending money in a manner very similar to modern banking rules. It regulated business relations between the Jews themselves, as well as between the Jews and the Christians, the Jews and the state, the Jews and the non-Jews. The Talmud held that all commitments be respected and this obligation was stronger regarding the non-Jews (Dimont, 2003: 270).

Later, Jews were pushed out from certain professions. The first profession they were deprived of was banking, despite of the fact that it was still forbidden by the Church. So, in France and England, where the Jews rose to high positions in riches and prestige, mainly from lending money to rulers, they kept these positions up to the point when they were pushed out by the English and French money lenders, when these kingdoms realized they could survive without Jewish loans. The number of professions left open to the Jews continued to decrease. Laws were passed to isolate them from the Christian community and to distinguish them by wearing a badge on their clothes. Hostility toward them intensified. The first burning of the Talmud took place, ritual-murder accusations were made, and numerous uncontrollable acts took place.

Yet, the Jews were not killed or exterminated, but banished. They moved to the east, to Germany, Poland, Austria, and Lithuania, where dukes invited them to settle for the same reasons they were previously invited by the western European countries. From 1500 the European centre of gravity completely shifted to Eastern Europe. However, here, as time passed by, the same fate repeated of pushing out of the economic activities, with the greatest resistance shown by the craftsmen. Thus, the research of Izrael Abrahams (Abrahams, 1958) on the life of the Jews in Prague reveals that in this city, in 1600 there were sixty professions open to the Jews, whereas in 1700 this number drastically diminished, falling to two in 1800, when the only Jewish professions were retail trade and repurchasing.

The persecution of the Jews continued during the Reformation. The Catholic Church, considering that they did not accept Catholicism, persecuted and closed them in ghettos. This same attitude toward them was formed by the Protestants, too. This was expressed by Martin Luther in some of his 95 theses nailed to the walls of the church in Wittenberg in 1517, which meant, as Dimont



puts it, "there was no room now for Renaissance and Jews". In 1516 Venice introduced the first ghetto for the complete isolation of the Jews. In 1550 they were expelled from Genoa, by 1569 from most of the Papal States. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Western Europe, which for one thousand years had been the center of European Jewry, had practically no Jewish population left (Dimont, 2003: 232).

Yet, during the Reformation the hostile acts were aimed at the others within the Christian community rather than the Jews. Soon the two warring Christian blocks realized that they could benefit from the Jews and each of them endeavored to win them to their side. Thus, Martin Luther, in an article entitled "That Jesus was born a Jew" called the Jews to join the Lutherans. Their refusal drew a harsh turn against them.

After the religious wars, which were also a social revolution, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the feudal state was replaced with the new state founded on secular values where the middle class dominated, the need for money to provide for the state offices redirected the rulers to the Jews. They were experienced as embodiment of modern capitalism and the rulers relied considerably on them in providing means for a continual functioning of their states.

The Protestantism began as a religious movement, but through it people expected to achieve their economic goals. It soon began to permit what the Catholic Church had forbidden. In a short time the religious movement turned into a social revolution. As the modes of production changed, the new economic class expected the state to legalize what they were doing, and the church to sanctify it. The Protestant Church and the capitalist state went hand in hand. In this union the Jews fit in well, whose position of migrants forced to consume someone else's cultures without putting their own in danger, made them leaders in modern courses. Or, as Dimont concludes: "In the medieval period, because the Jew was not part of the feudal system and its institutions, he became a cosmopolitan in his life and a universalist in his thought. He spoke the languages of the world, and appreciated its cultures. Because he had no prejudices he could carry ideas and commodities from one nation to another. Because he was an outsider with an education, he could view societies objectively and assess their weaknesses and strengths. He became the social critic and the prophet for new social justice" (Dimont, 2003: 293).

During the seventeenth century, the Jews regained the favour of the rulers, who found that with them they could weaken politically and economically the power of the guilds. They were encouraged to settle in small towns and villages and conduct many businesses there. In Germany they were incited to settle in the new towns founded by the German princes. They even inhabited garrison towns

where they supplied the armies. Yet, they were mostly instigated to settle the main cities, because the Jewish tradesmen financed the wars with loans which were returned by giving them privileges rather than money (Kaplan, 2007: 325). So, the Jews who were banished from England in 1290 from a feudal Catholic state, were readmitted in 1655 by Protestant and mercantile England. The Jews expelled from a Catholic and feudal France between 1400 and 1500 were readmitted in the seventeenth century. The expelled Jews from the various German states in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were readmitted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Protestant and mercantile states.

Only the Jews expelled from Spain and Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not accepted until modern times. This is one proof for the different attitude toward the Jews by the Catholic and Protestant Churches conditioned by the concrete economic conditions. The West Catholic feudal states did not want the Jews for religious reasons and because they did not have the need of them, whereas the Protestant countries accepted them because they had an economic need for them. The Eastern European countries, although Catholic, admitted the Jews because during that period their economies did not have a developed middle class which would take over the function of the Jews. Some eastern European rulers consciously admitted the Jews to stop the development of their own middle merchant class which would endanger their rule. But, considering that the Jews were connected with the noble class, the surfs perceived them as their members and when the wave of revolutions began in Eastern Europe, they fell victims to the same violence (Dimont, 2003:236).

The economic crisis in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century affected mostly the Jews, this time bringing about their physical extermination. During the World War II the vast majority of the Jews in the part of Europe occupied by Germany were killed with only a few hundred thousand remaining alive (Lewis, 1996: 362). When, after the war, the economy revived again, the Jews gradually started to find their place in the new economic order. A typical example of their moving upwards is the United States of America, where those who managed to survive the holocaust, first managed to enter as workers in the textile industry while later they predominated in the film industry (Glazer and Monihan, 1963:2).

With regard to the future of the Jews, I will mention the ideas of Max Dimont - the author of the fascinating work, - which is referred to largely in this article, who divided Jewish past and future history in three periods, each lasting

two millennia: the first, taking place on the territory of the Near East, and the second, the Diaspora in Europe and North America. To foresee the third one, he proceeds from Arnold Toynbee's cyclic theory. Following the tracing of this theory (and probably taking into consideration the unsolvable conflict with the surrounding Arab peoples on the territory of the old homeland where the new Jewish state was situated), he comes to the conclusion that the third period will also be a Diaspora, which, by nature of things, will be directed towards the new civilizations in their infancy. Those civilizations, according to him, are the Russian, Chinese and South American ones.

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