

**Jewish-Christian Differentiation
in the 14th and 15th Century Iberian Peninsula**

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Abstract

In the Edict of Expulsion of the Jews (1492), Christian authorities employed three deliberate methods of differentiation to distance themselves from the Jewish population and incite a sense of justification for their forced removal. In the rhetorical shifts from spatial differentiation to moral differentiation to intrinsic differentiation, the authors of the Edict assigned an increasing level of agency onto the Jewish population as a means to pursue harsher action against them. While there were historical precedents for the actions highlighted in the Edict, the order of increasing severity emphasizes a calculated demonization of the Jewish population.

The medieval Iberian Peninsula was a cultural mosaic with a complex history of competing political forces and religious contention. While the Visigoth and Islamic periods of rule are rich with their own treatment of the religious landscape, this paper will focus on the development of increased cultural tension between the Christian authorities and the subjected Jewish population. In order to highlight the perception of the Christian authorities, I will analyze various assertions in the 1492 Edict of Expulsion signed by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand and how these particular phrases work to illustrate a growing desire to differentiate Christians from Jews in the century leading up to the Edict. In 1492, the Edict of the Expulsion of the Jews marked an attempt at a final measure taken by Christian authorities to distance themselves from Jewish inhabitants. Christian-Jewish tensions in the Iberian Peninsula did not start in the 14th century, however, this period serves as a starting point to illustrate the complexities imbedded in the 1492 Edict. I would argue that through the rhetoric employed, one can see a progressive development from spatial differentiation to intrinsic differentiation imposed onto Jewish inhabitants by the Christian authorities. The development of this seemingly deeper, and largely inescapable mode of differentiation by the mid to late-15th century highlights the desire of the Christian authorities in the period to assign a pseudo-agency to Jews as a means of justifying a more severe castigation.

As the proclamation progresses, the rhetoric employed highlights periods of separation, inquisition, and “contagion” as issues that ultimately brought the Christian leaders to demand the expulsion of Jewish inhabitants.¹ As the Jews were viewed to be an increasing threat, the Christian rulers instilled a greater sense of urgency, within their rhetoric, to demand expulsion.

¹ “The Edict of Expulsion of the Jews - 1492 Spain.” Trans. Edward Peters, Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, Accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.sephardicstudies.org/decreed.html>.

The first two methods of differentiation ultimately lay the groundwork for understanding the third for it is in this final mode that Christian authorities seem to ‘draw a line in the sand’.

However, not only do the measures marginalize the Jewish population, but they also aim to be slanderous and defaming.

Physical/Spatial Differentiation

David Nirenberg describes Christian-Jewish relation on the Iberian Peninsula as a “punctuated equilibrium: long periods of constant but functional conflict separated by episodes of widespread violence.”² Within the 1492 Edict, this ‘equilibrium’ established centuries earlier was illustrated at the forefront. For example, the existence of the *juderia*, a “royally chartered and controlled Jewish quarter,” was already a “regularize[ed]” concept by the end of the 13th century.³ This physical separation was deemed necessary by the Christian authorities because “wicked Christians” were believed to have converted to Judaism and that through physical separation, “the situation would remedy itself.”⁴ Placing their own decree within this particular narrative highlights how the Iberian rulers used known methods of separation that had produced ‘positive’ results in the past. Philippe Wolff also notes that in the 14th century, this type of physical separation was not just the creation of Jewish quarters but was also comprised of forcing Jews to wear “special emblems,” and being “forbidden to take Christian names.”⁵

At the most basic level, these ostracizing actions taken against Jews were attempts by the surrounding Christian population to have the ability to immediately distinguish between the two

² David Nirenberg, “Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (2002): 1066, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/532664>

³ Jonathan Ray, *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 147.

⁴ “The Edict of Expulsion of the Jews - 1492 Spain.” Trans. Edward Peters

⁵ Philippe Wolff, “The 1391 Pogrom in Spain. Social Crisis or Not?” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971): 8, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650241>.

groups. This desire to ‘brand’ a collective group of people and push them into cordoned areas of cities not only highlights a Christian fear of Judaizing but also, it may illustrate the insecurities of the Christian Iberian rulers in the 15th century. The sponsors of this Edict argued that the Judaizing of Christians was unavoidable given a lack of Jewish-Christian spatial differentiation. In order to understand this notion, there are at least two possible reasons: there existed a conceptualization of a religious hierarchy with Judaism superseding Christianity by some means, or this reasoning was an exemplification of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in late medieval Iberia. While these are just two possibilities, contextually the latter option proves to be the most viable. As the document continues, the shift in methods of differentiation highlighted at later points in the text illustrate that this assessment of Jewish-Christian inter-relational development is an early stage in a larger process of demonization.

Moral Differentiation

While the persecution of Jewish communities by Christian authorities was not a singular event, these actions were also coupled with a growing dispensation for a Christian-Jewish moral differentiation. According to the 1492 Edict, the differentiation of space between Jewish and Christian communities was not a strong enough measure to ensure the preservation and sanctity of Christianity. Therefore, the accusatory rhetoric devolved further to depict Jewish people and respective communities as having lived to serve a single “evil and wicked purpose[:]. . . [to] corrupt those whom God [had] until [then] most desired to preserve.”⁶ In this example, the desired differentiation is no longer focused on physical proximity, but rather, the perceived effects a close proximity between Jews and Christians brought to the region. In the case of

⁶ “The Edict of Expulsion of the Jews - 1492 Spain.” Trans. Edward Peters

spatial separation, the language in the Edict portrays the issue of Christian Judaization as a by-product of interaction, yet as the proclamation continues, it shifts from a by-product to an intention. It is in this notion of intent that I argue a for the presence of a moral understanding of differentiation because the Christian authors of this text portray a Jewish pseudo-agency from which they *choose* to fulfill their ‘purpose’.

In the shift from a focus on a spatial differentiation to moral differentiation, the Christian authors of this text imbue a sense of pseudo-agency onto the Jewish subjects. By highlighting that the “Jews [increased] in continuing” their perceived immorality and assumed goal of Judaizing, the author does not denote them as completely passive subjects.⁷ While I do not mean to claim they were conferred any true and deserved value by the Christian elites, they were, however, still a force to be dealt with. For example, going back to the 14th century, Michael Alpert highlights how the “Black Death of 1348 appeared to justify the common suspicion that Jews, enemies of humankind, poisoned the wells.”⁸ In this earlier example, we see an illustration of a perceived immorality of Jewish people due to the actions they were believed to have taken. By asserting this pseudo-agency through a frame of immorality, the Christian rulers and authors of the 1492 Edict demonize the Jewish community for their supposed actions while at the same time give themselves an avenue/justification for harsher persecution.

Even though this document proscribes the Jewish inhabitants with a minor level of agency, it was only a tactic employed by the Christian authorities as a means to justify a more imposing authority. By claiming that the Jews had an overarching nefarious ‘purpose’, the Edict

⁷ “The Edict of Expulsion of the Jews - 1492 Spain.” Trans. Edward Peters

⁸ Michael Alpert, *Secret Judaism and the Spanish Inquisition* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2008), 10.

directly assigns a moral dispensation of Jews. This supposed purpose is then portrayed as an active threat to the Christian community (much like the previous example of the Black Death) that must be suppressed. Furthermore, by depicting this method of differentiation as an escalation from the previous spatial differentiation, the Christian authorities aimed to rationalize their authority to the greater Christian population to escalate tactics of persecution. The primary tactic in this case is ultimately grounded in the basic purpose of the Edict: to proclaim the ‘necessary’ expulsion of the Jews from Iberia.

Intrinsic Differentiation

The final method of differentiation used in the Edict is by far the most pervasive and demands the most attention. Moving into the 15th century, the third mode of differentiation illustrated in the Edict of 1492 was the belief that no matter the circumstance, any person who was Jewish, or of Jewish descent, carried with them an inherent and unchangeable ‘otherness’. Toward the end of the Edict, the text highlights how “those who perturb the good and honest life of cities and towns and by contagion can injure others should be expelled.”⁹ Having likened Jews or the presence of a Jewish ancestry to a ‘contagion’, this section marks the shift from a Christian-Jewish moral differentiation to an intrinsic differentiation. In this case, the use of the term intrinsic is meant to denote an ascribed quality that cannot be changed by those who are believed to possess it; a certain quality that supersedes intention by being unalterable and fundamentally woven into the fabric of the person in question. Therefore, the particular use of the term ‘contagion’ elicits a sense that Jews had within their bodily system an invisible and irrefutable innate difference to those who were Christian. In the shift from claiming that Jews

⁹ “The Edict of Expulsion of the Jews - 1492 Spain.” Trans. Edward Peters

had an ‘evil purpose’ to claiming that there was something different in their bodily composition, the author of this edict expressed a heightened anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Christian authorities in the 15th century.

By extending the perceived difference between Jews and Christians to an intrinsic evaluation, the Iberian rulers furthered their attempt to assert a growing sense of fear and urgency in order to take measures to remove the ‘contagion’. In an attempt to decipher a possible reason for this shift from a moral evaluation to an intrinsic assertion, one can contextualize this narrative in the larger socio-religious landscape of Iberian in the years leading up to the Edict. Following heightened Jewish persecutions of the late 14th century, many Jewish inhabitants chose, for a variety of reasons, to convert to Christianity. In the case of the 1391 pogroms of various localities in the Peninsula, Wolff notes that often the choice was between baptism or death.¹⁰ This sweeping persecution then led to a mass conversion of Jews to Christianity that were labeled as *conversos*. However, from this mass conversion developed a desire of ‘true’ Christians to differentiate themselves from ‘crypto-Jewish’, those who converted to Christianity but were still believed to practice Judaism, and *converso* inhabitants. As a way for Christians to differentiate from *converso* Christians in the 15th century, the Edict argues for the existence of an indivisible and intrinsic difference between Christians and Jews.

Such an argument for the innate difference between Jews and Christians, however, was not new to the Edict of 1492. In the mid-15th century, the popularization of *limpieza de sangre*, ‘purity of blood’, provided the ‘Old Christians’ with an intrinsic argumentation against the new converts, or as Olivia Ward calls it, “a theoretical underpinning” to justify an inherent

¹⁰ Philippe Wolff, “The 1391 Pogrom in Spain. Social Crisis or Not?” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971): 8-12, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650241>.

differentiation.¹¹ The notion that one's "culture was fixed in the reproduction of the blood" further illustrates the intrinsic nature of the final method of differentiation in the Edict.¹² The 'contagion' was viewed as an inevitable product of existence that would develop even from a single drop of Jewish blood in one's genealogy. Therefore, when such a claim is made in the Edict of 1492, it is a claim that had existed previously and was repurposed to serve as the final argument for Jewish expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula.

Conclusion

While the the medieval Iberian Peninsula was at many times a wonderful example of co-habitation and prosperity, the 14th and 15th centuries largely illustrated examples of fear, intolerance, and state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The three methods of differentiation used in the Edict of Expulsion were not unique to that document but they were organized and discussed in an intentional order to arouse the greatest sense of urgency and acceptance of the Edict from their non-Jewish subjects. By concluding with an assertion of 'Jewish-ness' as a contagion that could not be managed, the pseudo-agency ascribed to the Jewish population by the Christian authorities was a powerful method to demonize them to the fullest extent possible. Given that the Christian authorities not only made these slanderous claims against Jews but framed them in such a way that elicited a Jewish intention and an uncontrollable disposition for those actions, the Edict of Expulsion is a clear example of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in the early modern period.

¹¹ Olivia Ward, "Impure and Vile: Limpieza de Sangre and Racial Formation in Early Modern Spain," *Ex Post Facto* 25 (Spring 2016): 173, accessed June 3, 2018, https://history.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/ExPostFacto/Olivia_Ward_Impure_and_Vile.pdf.

¹² Ward, "Impure and Vile: Limpieza de Sangre and Racial Formation in Early Modern Spain," 173.

Although religious contentions of the 1492 Edict of Expulsion occurred over 500 years ago, the implications of the strategies employed in this document resonate with issues of the present period. In his inaugural 1966 lecture, Abraham Joshua Heschel emphasized that his “first task in every encounter [was] to comprehend the personhood of the human being [he faced], to sense the kinship of being human.”¹³ This particular notion necessitates not an immediate acceptance of another’s religion, but an acceptance of their basic humanity. This seemingly simple notion was about as far from the rhetoric of the 1492 Edict as can be. That missing fundamental understanding is what truly made the Edict such a destructive decree, for as Alpert notes, Jews and *conversos* were viewed as “aliens in the social body,” for their perceived ‘otherness’ projected them past the boundaries of common humanity.¹⁴ Nothing can excuse the blatant religious intolerance of the Edict, but it was the development of a demonizing rhetoric of 15th century Jews that was, by the end, centered around differentiating Jews from people. The Christian authorities of the late 15th century assigned this intrinsic differentiation between Christians and Jews that reduced the Jewish person to nothing more than a ‘contagion’, completely absent of sense of a ‘kinship of being human’ as Heschel described. That is where religious conflict resolution today must begin; by understanding and accepting the kinship of being human and not ascribing a sub-human framework from which to understand the relationship in question.

¹³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Religion is an Island,” in *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Harold Kasimow & Byron L. Sherwin, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 7.

¹⁴ Michael Alpert, *Secret Judaism and the Spanish Inquisition* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2008), 11.

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