

CHAPTER 28

Jewry in Christian Europe in the Middle Ages

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Unlike Jews living in Muslim countries, the Jewish community under Christian rule suffered persecution and murder. Despite the development of traditional Jewish scholarship, medieval Jewish life was continually subject to Christian attack. In 1095 Pope Urban II proclaimed the first Crusade, an act which led to an onslaught against Jews in the Rhineland. Rather than convert to Islam, Jews martyred themselves as an act of faith. In the following centuries, Jews continually persecuted Jews on religious grounds. Viewed as demonic Christ-killers, they were accused of killing Christian children to use their blood at Passover. Further, they were portrayed as profaning the host in order to torture Jesus' body. As a result of such contempt, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 imposed various restrictions regulating Jewish life.

In the same century Dominican priests actively campaigned against Jews. In 1240 they participated in a disputation in Paris concerning the *Talmud* which they believed defamed the Christian faith. During this period Jews were repeatedly expelled from countries where they lived. How is one to understand such antipathy? Given the stereotypes of Jews expressed in the writings of the Church Fathers, the Church embarked on a sustained onslaught against the Jews throughout the Middle Ages. In the light of such formalized anti-Jewish attitudes, what is the Jewish community to make of recent attempts at reconciliation between Jews and Christians? Can such steps overcome centuries of antipathy?

In this regard you should reflect on the current position of the Church regarding the Jewish people. During the last few decades Church authorities have been anxious to disassociate themselves from previous teaching about Judaism. In particular, most Church bodies have formally renounced the supersessionist

theology of previous centuries. In their opinion, God continues to have a covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. Further, it is widely accepted today that Jews can be saved as long as they are faithful adherents of their own tradition. Arguably, such a reversal of attitudes paves the way for a fruitful Jewish–Christian encounter. What do you think?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Search for information about Christian anti-Semitism through the centuries, such as at <http://didickerson.igc.org/antisemitism.html>.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Type in anti-Semitism. Have a look at the various ways Jews have been presented in Christian sources.
- Imagine that you are a Jew living in the Middle Ages. Write a letter to a local bishop explaining why it would be impossible for Jews to use the blood of Christian children.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Stage a debate about the legacy of Christian anti-Semitism. One side should argue that Christianity is inherently anti-Jewish; the other side should contend that the Christian faith can divest itself of anti-Jewish attitudes.

- Ask a local minister or priest to speak to the class about current developments in the Church regarding Judaism and the Jewish people.
- Tell the students to create a newspaper with articles about medieval Christian anti-Semitism. They should focus on such issues as desecration of the host, blood libel, etc.