

The Background for Instituting the Pure Blood Laws and *Conversos* in the Late Medieval Spain

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I.

The great pogrom of 1391, beginning in Seville, quickly spread to other towns, and many Jews converted to Christianity in the process. Indeed Spain had come closest to make the mass conversion of Jews, long-cherished desire of Christians come true. However, soon Christians came to feel that it was a disaster rather than a blessing. Now conversos, Jewish converts, were, to a significant extent, recognized as pseudo-Christians adhering to the past faith.

Generally the basic position of the academic world to this problem was to emphasize the continuity, not transformation: in terms of senses, there was no difference in discrimination between before and after the mass conversions. There exist two exclusive positions around the cause for persistence of discrimination. The first blames the continuity of discrimination upon the unchanging nature of the discriminating, the second upon that of the discriminated.

These arguments around the nature of discrimination exclude the transformation in Spanish society between before and after the mass conversions. As David Nirenberg suggests appropriately, it is true that the mass conversions of tens of thousands of Jews after 1319 transformed the sacred and social worlds.¹ The Christian society faced with the unprecedented situation of mass conversions produced the new social discourses around the realities of conversos. The attitudes of Spanish Christians to the Jewish conversions changed remarkably at the end of the 14th century. In that sense, this period can be said to be one of the milestones in the history of Spain's anti-Semitism.

II.

In Christian doctrine converts were generally considered to be in the fullest sense a member of the Church community, once reborn in the waters of Christian baptism. The rite of entry into the church accompanied existential changes.² Theologians taught that baptism must be held to leave ineffaceable traces in the order of the spirit. And the persistence of its effect was absolute.³

All the restrictions placed upon the activity, social, economic and political, of the Jews, were removed

¹ D. Nirenberg, "Enmity and Assimilation: Jews, Christians, and Converts in Medieval Spain," *Common Knowledge* 9 (2003), p. 140.

² Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York, 1988), p. 49.

³ E. A. Synan, *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1967), p. 55.

once the Jew adopted Christianity. Conversos could enter the Church.⁴

However, Jewish converts faced Old Christians that were deeply suspicious of with their Christian identity. Let's examine some cases.

In the process of pope's election in 1130, as soon as Anacletus II was elected as a pope, his Jewish ancestry became an issue. His opponents led by Bernard of Clairveaux seized on his Jewish origin. Bernard even said that "it is well known that Jewish offspring now occupies the see of St. Peter to the injury of Christ." Anacletus was blamed physically for being dark and pale, more like a Jew or an Arab than a Christian, with a deformed body and the bad odor of his ancestor. The racial issue was seized upon by Anacletus' enemies as an excuse for their opposition.⁵ Some Christians like Bernard were likely to think baptism was unlikely to transform convert's religious identity.

In 1290 the Jews of Southern Italy were converted by force. Nevertheless, for the next two centuries their descendants were still known as Jews and were referred to in official documents as *Neofiti*(neophytes) or *Mercanti*(merchants).⁶

To judge from purity and impurity, the notion of the so-called *foetor judaicus* was central to Medieval anti-semitism. The *foetor judaicus* is another distinctive sign of the demonic Jew. Seifried Helbling, a 13th-century poet said that "There was never a state so large that a mere thirty Jews would not saturate it with stench and unbelief."⁷ In addition Jews were accused of corrupting air, wells, and streams. Corruption, contamination, and filth were almost tangible phenomena.⁸ Though the Jews were supposed to lose their faults including stench after being baptized,⁹ Christians began to suspicion that baptism could transform the Jewishness as a biological flaw. According to one fifteenth-century Spanish document, Old Christians then seemed to feel that Conversos, apart from Jews, smelt bad.¹⁰ Writing in the early sixteenth-century the chronicler A. Bernáldez suggested that even if some of Jews were baptized, the nature of this baptism cancelled by nullity and by judaizing, they still smelt foul like Jew. He equated 'this deprived heresy' with 'leprosy'.¹¹ These cases emphasize the Christian notion of Jewishness as physical and mental problems, which was handed down through inheritance and couldn't be removed even through conversion and baptism.

In Medieval Europe, on the other hand, Jews were treated as filthy like prostitutes. For example, the

⁴ S. Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century: A Study of their Relations during the years 1198-1254, Based on the Papal Letters and Conciliar Decrees of the Period* (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 21.

⁵ S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1957-67), vol 4, p. 11.

⁶ Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: The Iberian and the German Models* (New York, 1982), pp. 6~7.

⁷ J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven, 1943), pp. 47~48.

⁸ A. MacKay, "The Hispanic-Converso Predicament," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35 (1985), p. 167.

⁹ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 48; Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 53.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹ A. Mackay, "The Hispanic-Converso Predicament," p. 168.

Avignon municipality provided that if a Jew touched fruit, he, like a prostitute had to purchase it because he defiled it.¹² Mary Douglas noted that "the whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children."¹³ According to her, the possibility of danger caused by impurity was used to exclude the other, and Jews too were segregated and stigmatized by humiliating badges. In this respect impurity and filthiness could be regarded as characteristic of blood, not easily effaced by conversions and baptism. The term 'limpieza' used to describe the blood of Old Christians shows this distinctness remarkably.¹⁴

Various races like Jews and Moors converted to Christianity. However, for example, in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* of Alfonso X, the Wise there seems to be no story in which a Christian character displays African and other racial traits. Noting physical change that takes place when Jews convert to Christianity, Hatton and MacKay suggest that, just as the exaggerated negative portraits were artistic creations designed to point out Jewish difference, the sudden physical likenesses of the newly converted are also creations, styled to convey the message that a convert was indeed capable of assimilation.¹⁵ However, given that in the miniature of *Cantigas de Santa Maria* 108 a Jewish boy who had been born with his head on backward remained deformed even after he converted to Christianity, it is difficult to agree with them completely. In addition, though *Cantigas de Santa Maria* 85 depicts positively the Jew that converts to Christianity, the pictorial representation shows him with ugly face and crooked nose. Therefore these cases are thought to reflect the substantial difficulty of conversos being assimilated to Christian community thoroughly.

The term *alborayque* is one of the outstanding examples of converso's image. Its source is *Libro del Alborayque* (Book of the Alborayque) composed around 1488. Alborayque originally derived from al-Burāq, the Arabic name of Muhammad's mount is a monster composed of numerous animals. Alborayque, the author explains, was one of the names applied to the Jewish converts. Thus, the term implied that the conversos were neither Jews nor Christians.¹⁶

These cases evidence that medieval anti-semitism isn't just theological or religious. Thus, despite church's dogma that through the baptism converts go through existential changes, lots of Old Christians seemed to think their Jewish identity as biological malady wouldn't disappear.

¹² Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 11, pp. 85~86.

¹³ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁴ This can be applied to *moriscos* "due to the fact they descended from the bastard lineage of Ismael, whereas the Christians belonged to the noble lineage of Isaac." MacKay, "The Hispanic-*Converso* Predicament," pp. 168~169.

¹⁵ V. Hatton and A. Mackay, "Anti-Semitism in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61 (1983), p. 195.

¹⁶ D. E. Carpenter, "Social Perception and Literary Portrayal: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Spanish Literature," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, Edited by V. B. Mann, T. F. Glick & J. D. Dodds, (New York, 1992), p. 78.

III.

In the situations of the outbreak of plague, socio-economic difficulties, and chronic crisis of war, the relationship between Christians and Jews continued to worsen with a result of the great pogrom of 1391. Beginning on 6 June, it quickly spread to other Andalusian towns, and thereafter to Toledo, Valencia, Barcelona, Gerona, etc. The killings and the fear of persecutions led to mass conversions. Later, from 1449 onwards, a series of anti-semitic pogroms would again disrupt many towns. In addition, after the Tortosa disputation (1413-14) the camp of New Christians contained many converts who came to Christianity relatively spontaneously.

It is difficult to assess accurately the number of converts after 1391. Some scholars suggest that of about 200,000 Jews of the time about 100,000 people converted to Christianity.¹⁷ Thus, in Spain one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe existed, conversos came to constitute a independent segment of population.

During a generation after 1391 Old Christians pursued to reinforce the boundary between Christian and Jew rather than focus on the religious practices of the converts or on the differences between Old Christian and New. We can assume this situation in that King Joan asserted that it had become impossible for Old Christians to tell who was still a Jew and who a convert.¹⁸

At any rate the impediments and limitations imposed on the Jew legally were erased completely, and all offices in Church and state were open to conversos. For example, Pablo de Santa María, the former Rabbi Solomon Halevi who converted voluntarily in 1390 became Bishop of Burgos later. His son, Alonso de Cartagena succeeded him in that office and represented Spain at the Council of Basel in 1434.¹⁹

Throughout the Middle Ages the whole of Christian Europe had perceived Jewish problem in dimension of conversion essentially. The Jews were a group apart because they weren't Christians. Conversion would make them disappear as a distinct entity and the problem cease to be. Spain had now come closest to making this pan-European dream a reality. At the time the mainstream society began to feel that the mass conversions weren't not the fundamental solution of the problem. So long as the Jews had remained within Judaism, they could be contain within well-defined limits through restrictive laws. Now the legal and institutional mechanisms against the Jews were of no use to conversos.²⁰

Various terms used to name converts and their offspring from the fifteenth century, ie., converso, mar-rano[pig], tornadizo[turncoat], cristiano nuevo[New Christian] or alborayque evidence the ambiguity of the situation and difficulty of defining the enemy.²¹ As the situation that the realities of conversos were not grasped was combined with the overall function failure of social control system, conversos as insiders were looming ahead as formidable elements.

¹⁷ V. Vives, *An Economic History of Spain*, p. 244.

¹⁸ Nirenberg, "Enmity and Assimilation," p. 141.

¹⁹ Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism*, pp. 8-9.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

More important, the mass conversions of 1391 that showed for the first time in Spanish Christian imagination the possibility of a world without Jews caused the crisis of Christian identity as Jews, the other disappeared.²²

Nirenberg refutes the so-called continuum of anti-semitism between before and after 1391, suggesting that the anti-*converso* movements of the mid-fifteenth century were not the straightforward and unavoidable consequences of earlier discriminations and identities.²³ However, in the vortex of unprecedented large-scale conversion and crisis of Christian identity Old Christians seem to have evoked newly their collective memory of Jewish identity of conversos, not erased by baptism and conversion.

IV.

To break through this crisis situation Old Christians had recourse to direct action. Antipathies to conversos led to a series of slaughter. Great massacres broke out in Toledo in 1449 and 1467, and in Andalusian towns including Cordoba in 1473.²⁴ However it did not become a fundamental solution.

Not long after the mass conversions of 1391 Old Christians began to insist on a new difference, i.e., blood to base segregation of New Christians and Old on. This was a phenomenon unique in Spain. Jews were supposed to be incapable of conversion and assimilation because of blood difference.²⁵

Thus a new legal definition was needed to control conversos. Against this backdrop, the 'purity of blood' (*limpieza de sangre*) logic was invented. The regulations known as pure blood laws (*estatutos de limpieza de sangre*) were the attempt to deprive conversos of the privileges they had enjoyed as Christians. Therefore, this new laws had contradictory characteristic of denying generally the meaning of conversion project that the Christian society had thrown its effort into. The only way to justify the discriminatory legal action against conversos and their descendants was hereditary because officially the difference of religion didn't exist anymore. Blood, not religion became, as it were, a decisive factor.

As to many medieval Christians the transition from 'other' to 'self' culminated in sexual union. Therefore, the entire process of spiritual identification and integration could be most powerfully represented in terms of the sexual act.²⁶ In this respect New Christians who couldn't easily join the kinship groups of Old Christians failed to be integrated into Christian community of faith.

Conversos constituted a new type of the Jewish group. They were a group of alien species in the Christian community. Now it was not a key point whether they were true Christians or pseudo-Christians. The laws aimed at the whole conversos, not distinguishing between them. Everyone in the Jewish ancestry was under the control of the laws, regardless of whether he had Christian faith or not. At this time baptism

²² Nirenberg, "Enmity and Assimilation," p. 152.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁴ Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia, 1966), vol 2, p. 279.

²⁵ S. H. Brody, *The Construction of the Literary Jew in Texts from Thirteenth-Century Castile*. Ph.D. dissertation (University of Kentucky, 2002), p. 118.

²⁶ Nirenberg, "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002), p. 1073.

was not regarded as necessary and sufficient condition for entry into the Christian community. A statement of the New Testament was presented as an evidence. In the New Testament (Matthew 27:25) appears the idea of ancestral culpability. In the statement which reads, "Then answered all the people, and said, His blood on us, and on our children," a guilty charge is upon people who were not even present at the scene of Jesus' death. The religion of 'our children' is unspecified.²⁷ The purity of blood was said to be superior to the purity of faith.

As a result of legislation enacted in Toledo in 1449, conversos were no longer permitted to hold office or testify in court cases.²⁸ Purity of blood eventually became a requirement of holding office in Spain and Portugal, and in their overseas dependencies.²⁹

Jacques Le Goff's argument that the laws considered the Christian world to be ideal and perfect and were part of the persecution activities for defending it from all the taints is pretty convincing.³⁰ The expulsion of the Jews in 1492, the expulsion of the moriscos in 1609, the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767. Spain specialized in expulsion.

V.

The year 1391 was a very important turning point in Spanish *anti-semitic* history. The unprecedented large-scale conversion after 1391 evoked Old Christians' traditional collective memories of Jewish identity of conversos, and in the process conversos became a distinct group who were neither Christians nor Jews. In this respect conversos were a social and cultural construct.

Though debatable, early modern Spain didn't suffer a serious witch craze. Stephen Haliczer's argument that conversos functioned as a substitute for the witch is compelling. "The only thing that could account for Spain's relative inactivity in the face of the European witch craze was the presence in that country of another target of displaced aggression, a target so firmly identified in the public mind with all that was evil and pernicious that it could readily substitute for the witch as the ultimate source of evil."³¹

²⁷ Brody, *The Construction of the Literary Jew*, p. 118.

²⁸ Carpenter, "Social Perception and Literary Portrayal," p. 71

²⁹ E. Kedourie, *Spain and the Jews* (London, 1992), p. 13.

³⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *A la recherche du moyen age* (Louis Audibert, 2003).

³¹ S. Haliczer, "The Jew as Witch: Displaced Aggression and the Myth of the Santo Niño de La Guardia," *Cultural Encounters: The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, Edited by M. E. Perry and A. J. Cruz (Berkeley, 1991), p. 147.