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Frank P. Lacopo

Ball State University, fplacopo@bsu.edu



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Medieval Europe and the Culture of Contempt in the Age of the Lateran Councils

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Anthony Mansfield of the University of Keele for his excellent seminar in High Medieval History, in which the original version of this essay took shape.

Western Europe experienced a significant increase in discrimination against social minorities in the period conventionally labeled the long twelfth century.¹ This period was one of scholastic sophistication, urbanization, and consolidation of central secular and church power.² The very developments that lead to the flourishing of Latin Christian scholasticism and culture led to discriminatory policies against minorities who were increasingly seen as a threat to this freshly vitalized Christendom.³ Discrimination was driven by scholastic and other elites, whose attitudes reverberated with those lower on the social ladder as Western Christendom began to define itself as a unified entity that was under attack and in opposition to “enemy others.”⁴

Of the many groups under pressure in this period were Jews, lepers, and homosexuals. While these groups were discriminated against for different reasons and through different means, their common identity as deviations from the norm in a society that feared difference made them victims of the same social and intellectual movement that combatted the “other” in the long twelfth century. They have a collective history in this regard. This study draws on documentation

¹ The exact time frame for the long twelfth century varies in the historiography. This paper follows Charles Homer Haskins’ temporal span of c. 1050-c. 1250, which he describes as a period of scholarly renaissance and cultural change in *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1957). William Chester Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 2002), 83.

² Haskins, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, vi-vii, 93.

³ R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 6-11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

from Britain, Francia, the Rhineland, and the Italian Peninsula to illustrate the long twelfth century transition to pronounced discrimination against Jews, lepers, and homosexuals in its broad geographical sweep. While an exhaustive discussion cannot be attempted here given the topic's vastness, a fresh overview that revises existing historical perspectives will be useful to the field of medieval history.

Some historians point to cross-contextual structures and trends that developed over long periods of time as the primary forces of movement toward increased social discrimination in the long twelfth century. Others present an interpretation based on context-specific conflict and cultural interchange.⁵ This research is informed by Michael Frassetto, who suggests that the Christian worldview had a conception of social “others” since the time of Augustine of Hippo and that Europeans acknowledged and discriminated against outsider demographics continuously from classical times to the later Middle Ages. “Othering” and discrimination of those “others,” though, became more pronounced and violent from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries for context-specific reasons.⁶ A mixed method of analysis that considers both structural undercurrents and context-specific influences serves well for the topic of medieval

⁵ For the cross-contextual approach, see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (London: Chatto, 1975); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). For the particularistic approach, see David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ Michael Frassetto, “Heretics and Jews in the Writings of Ademar of Chabannes and the Origins of Medieval Anti-Semitism,” *Church History* 71 (2002): 1-4; Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, xi.

social discrimination.⁷ With this perspective, the Lateran Councils appear as the central events of the long twelfth century related to social “othering.” The councils reinforced and standardized Christians’ hostile behavior toward minorities as single events. R. I. Moore indeed suggests that the Fourth Lateran Council in particular “laid down a machinery of persecution for Western Christendom.”⁸ At the same time, the councils were the result of social developments that began a good deal of time beforehand.

Perhaps the most studied long twelfth century outsider group is that of the Jews. Trachtenberg suggests that structures setting Jews apart had existed since the conception of Christianity and had persisted as an undercurrent throughout the earlier Middle Ages. A change occurred around the turn of the millennium, when heresy- and Islam-related anxieties accentuated and brought to the surface anti-Jewish sentiments.⁹ The re-discovery of classical intellectual pursuit within learned ecclesiastical circles started in the eleventh century. C. H. Haskins’ “Twelfth Century Renaissance” provided an environment of greater articulation of religious opinions, which often entailed discriminatory rhetoric.¹⁰ Therefore, the enhanced perceived need to marginalize and combat Jews temporally coincided with a favorable intellectual environment for doing so.

⁷ Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* and Frassetto, “Heretics and Jews” provide examples of such a mixed approach.

⁸ Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 10.

⁹ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 11.

¹⁰ Frassetto, “Heretics and Jews,” 1; Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*; Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 83.

One movement toward greater discrimination facilitated by the twelfth century literary and classical revivals was more rigorous use of the fifth-century Theodosian Code and its successor legal texts. Within the code, Jews were forbidden from enjoying tenure and hence relied on landlords' good will for renewed property rights upon every succession.¹¹ This codified discrimination was largely ignored in the Carolingian period because such practices were socially and economically unviable.¹² By the twelfth century, though, a profound turnaround had occurred. Roman law was again embraced in spirit as well as letter. Landlords, often due to demographic pressure, began to exploit the new socio-legal environment, acquiring Jewish land by simply refusing to renew Jewish landholding rights.¹³

The rise of landless Jewry coincided with Jewish exclusion from urban guilds, pious Christian institutions that had no room for religious "others."¹⁴ Barred from respectable livelihoods, Jews increasingly resorted to moneylending, a profession that was effectively made pariah in mainstream Christianity by the

¹¹ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 26-27; *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmundian Constitutions*, ed. Clyde Pharr, Theresa Sherrer Davidson, and Mary Brown Pharr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 39, 45, 165, 468.

¹² Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 27.

¹³ Ibid. The dramatic effects of lord's refusal to re-grant tenure within the early twelfth century context is seen in Peter Abelard, *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian*, trans. P. J. Payer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1979), 33.

¹⁴ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 81.

1139 Second Lateran Council.¹⁵ The Jewish-usurer stereotype, a trope that has had destructive consequences even in the present day, was effectively created by high medieval marginalization culture and caused further aversion to Jews by Christian elite and commoner alike.

By the later twelfth century, the environment of “othering” along ethnic and religious lines had thoroughly exacerbated popular hate and fear of Jews. An extension of this hatred and fear was the widespread Christian belief in Jewish sacrificial and Eucharistic abominations as part of a pan-European Jewish conspiracy commonly known as the “blood libel.” Belief in the libel is succinctly described through Thomas of Monmouth’s 1173 hagiography on William of Norwich, a supposed victim of conspiratorial, heinous, and bloodthirsty Jews.¹⁶ These beliefs, held or exploited by many and articulated by Thomas of Monmouth, were of course entirely baseless but were widely accepted as fact. Mere rumors and rhetoric against the Jews were not the end of persecution.

Three of the harshest means of Jewish persecution were ghettoization, widespread expulsion, and pogroms. Jewish quarters initially arose due to occupational stratification. Jews naturally did not reside in guild areas within cities since they were forbidden therefrom and, like most groups under pressure,

¹⁵ “The Second Lateran Council,” on *Papal Encyclicals Online*, Canon 13, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum10.htm>.

¹⁶ Thomas of Monmouth, “The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich, 1173,” on Fordham University Internet Medieval Sourcebook, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1173williamnorwich.asp>.

tended to congregate. Compulsory ghettos were eventually established in the thirteenth century.¹⁷ Also, in the 1200s, social purification interests were such that monarchs found total Jewish expulsion expedient. This happened in England in 1290, France in 1306, sporadically in the German kingdoms, and finally in reconquered Iberia in 1492.¹⁸ At this later stage, passions within the context of The Crusade resulted in widespread atrocities and mass killings. These were undertaken en route to the Holy Land and were reported by chroniclers like Albert of Aix c.1120.¹⁹ These medieval holocaust events were confluences of Jewish “othering” and were perpetrated by Christians across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Lepers’ circumstances also deteriorated in the long twelfth century. Though the people of northwest Europe had always known of leprosy through biblical texts, particularly from Leviticus where lepers were instructed to live on the fringes of society, the disease only became prevalent in the north after crusaders brought pathogens home from the Middle East and southern Europe.²⁰ While lepers were revered for their affliction, which was seen as a mode of

¹⁷ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 82.

¹⁸ Joseph H. Lynch and Phillip C. Adamo, *The Medieval Church, A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 314; Barbara Rosenwein, *A Short History of the Middle Ages* (Peterborough: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 260.

¹⁹ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 168; Albert of Aix, “Emico and the Slaughter of Rhineland Jews,” on Fordham University Internet Medieval Sourcebook, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/albert-cde.asp>.

²⁰ Lynch and Adamo, *The Medieval Church*, 232; Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and His Northern Heirs* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), 48-49.

penitence for themselves and their prospective patrons, their position was ambiguous.²¹ They were also associated with sinfulness and taint that the highly conspicuous disease supposedly betrayed.²² Indeed, Gregory of Tours aligned conversion to Christianity with alleviation of leprosy in his account of Clovis' baptism, indicating that leprosy carried negative connotations for at least some Christians at an earlier date.²³

Beginning in the twelfth century, leper hospitals known as *leprosaria* were set up throughout Europe, with almost 300 appearing in England alone. In the beginning, these institutions resembled monasteries for those spiritually "blessed" with leprosy and some even followed an apostolic thirteen-man format like Carthusian monasteries.²⁴ While lepers were effectively marginalized and isolated within these *leprosaria*, the hospitals themselves were often located well within city limits and played roles in civic ceremony.²⁵ This testifies to the double-edged identity ascribed to lepers. They were on one hand blessed by their affliction, making their presence advantageous. They were kept in relative isolation for most of their days, though, indicating the existence of aversion as well. This aversion

²¹ Rosenwein, *Short History of the Middle Ages*, 260.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Gregory of Tours, "History of the Franks, Book II, Section 31," on Fordham University Internet Medieval Sourcebook, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/gregory-clovisconv.asp#n31>.

²⁴ Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, U. K.: Boydell, 2013), 318.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 324-325.

was reinforced and made more acceptable by their status as legally dead.²⁶ Long-standing cultural assumptions about lepers up to the early twelfth century were clearly extremely complex and provide a window into the medieval spiritual outlook.²⁷

The balance between revulsion from and acclamation of lepers gave way to harsh persecution relatively quickly. Historians have placed poor public health, resultant anxiety related to sickness, and pressure caused by the fourteenth century famine as causes for increased animosity toward “unclean” lepers.²⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, lepers acquired an association with Jews and other perceived enemies of Christendom. Common accusations entailed collusion between lepers and Jews in Eucharistic desecration and well pollution.²⁹ In 1179, the Third Lateran Council articulated a ban on lepers living among and attending mass with healthy people. This and other leper laws combined with long-standing stigma and anxiety brought on by public health crises and resulted in real enforcement by local authorities.³⁰ By the early 1300s, lepers were publically tortured and burned, most notably in France.³¹

²⁶ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 320; Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 294-295.

²⁹ Rosenwein, *Short History of the Middle Ages*, 260.

³⁰ “The Third Lateran Council,” on *Papal Encyclicals Online*, Canon 23, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum11.htm>; Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, U. K.: Boydell, 2006), 191.

³¹ Rosenwein, *Short History of the Middle Ages*, 260.

Like Jews and lepers, homosexuals were long considered social “others.” Arno Karlen summarizes the homophobic tradition running through Western history, dating to the classical Hellenes, Romans, and Hebrews. Each of these cultures spurned homosexuality to varying degrees. Treason, sacrilege, idolatry, and infraction of “natural law” were vices commonly associated with the orientation.³² The ancient and early medieval church idealized exclusive and procreative marriages between heterosexual couples and condoned virginal life as the greatest of vocations, as demonstrated in the works of Augustine of Hippo.³³ Clearly, homosexuality had always been inappropriate in the strict official stance of the church. However, individual cases of homosexuality were often overlooked in day-to-day life in the earlier Middle Ages.³⁴ The homosexual demographic met increased persecution as forces within the church began to zealously fight oversight of supposedly unwholesome acts in the long twelfth century.

Like many other developments toward discrimination, the increase in homophobia had its root in the flourishing academic culture that emerged around the turn of the millennium. The theologian Peter Damian coined the term “sodomy” in the 1000s, a characteristically eleventh-century attempt at linguistic

³² Arno Karlen, “The Homosexual Heresy,” *The Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 44.

³³ John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard, 1994), xxi; Augustine of Hippo, “Of Holy Virginitly,” in *Seventeen Short Treatises of S. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Translated, with Notes and Indices* (Oxford: Parker, 1847), 308; Augustine of Hippo, “On the Good of Marriage,” in *Seventeen Short Treatises*, 277.

³⁴ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, xxv.

definition. The term initially defined any sin related to corporal excess and abomination.³⁵

Damian fixated in particular on clerical homosexual relations and warned of deep Eucharistic corruption that might result.³⁶ Just as important was Pope Leo IX's response to Damian's polemic, which promised action against those who committed "crimes against nature."³⁷ In this vein, the Third Lateran Council of 1179 clamped down on clerical homosexuality and threatened excommunication for all lay homosexuals.³⁸ This homophobic policy sent ripples through the Church. In 1292, a homosexuality scare gripped the University of Paris and resulted in the banishment of high-profile theologians.³⁹

John of Salisbury decried what he saw as a widespread homosexuality crisis, which was only part of a general decline in European sexual morals.⁴⁰ According to Karlen, John's polemic hints at a historical reality in that the homosexual demographic may have become more visible to authorities, though not larger, in the High Middle Ages. This happened thanks to the development of

³⁵ Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 29.

³⁶ Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 38; Peter Damian, *Book of Gomorrah*, in *Peter Damian: Letters 31-60*, trans. Owen J. Blum (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 39-40.

³⁷ "Leo IX to Peter Damian, c.1050," in *Peter Damian: Letters*, 3-5.

³⁸ "Third Lateran Council," on *Papal Encyclicals Online*, Canon 11.

³⁹ Karlen, "The Homosexual Heresy," 45.

⁴⁰ John of Salisbury, *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers: Being a Translation of the First, Second, and Third Books and Selections from the Seventh and Eighth Books of the Policraticus of John of Salisbury*, ed. Joseph B. Pike (New York: Octagon, 1972), 200-202.

“deviant subcultures” within the context of increased urbanization.⁴¹ By the later Middle Ages, authorities and the general public began to see homosexuality and heresy as interchangeable.⁴² By 1250, harsher secular courts assumed jurisdiction over most sodomy cases, while the church’s literature on marital and sexual matters became increasingly stringent and explicit.⁴³ Later high medieval European culture had thus become staunchly homophobic.

R. I. Moore argues that the Lateran decrees “provided a program” for Western Christendom as a persecuting society.⁴⁴ The widespread movement toward increased persecution detailed by the Lateran Councils was facilitated by the pre-existence of marginalizing traditions, high medieval literary and classical revivals, subsequent church reforms, and changes in layfolk’s attitudes. These changes in attitude were the result of influences from the church elite slowly seeping into the rest of Latin Christian society.⁴⁵ While suggesting that there existed a single “standard” vector by which this transferal of ideas happened amounts to grand narrative, there seems to have been some standard means of ideological communication between social ranks. Representatives of the Church, like bishops and those who preached crusade, brought the call for persecution of Jews from higher ecclesiastical echelons to illiterate commonfolk, who undertook

⁴¹ Karlen, “The Homosexual Heresy,” 47-48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 51, 53.

⁴³ Weisner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality*, 38-39.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 6-7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-11.

much of the actual violence against Jews.⁴⁶ Persecution of lepers and homosexuals more often seemed to come directly from elites, whether through punishment of homosexuals via the courts or through the expulsion of lepers from churches and towns by Lateran decree and enforced by local magistrates.⁴⁷ Elites reached the persecuted and influenced persecutors among the commonfolk through the polemic of clergymen and courts.

The confluence of increased discrimination in the long twelfth century is represented in the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils, which, according to Barbara Rosenwein, “declared a single doctrine, discipline, and dogma” based on the idea that all who were not pious, mainstream, Latin Christians were treacherous.⁴⁸ Along these lines, it is important to emphasize that persecuted demographics were not always recognized as distinct within context, but often overlapped in their purported un-Christian activities.⁴⁹ Policies against them were articulated within the canons of the same central Church councils. R. I. Moore suggests that the attitudes of the elite are central in explaining the common timing of increased persecution of disparate groups. Within the context of profound

⁴⁶ This is seen in Otto of Freising, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. C. C. Mierow (New York: Norton, 1966), 74.

⁴⁷ Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*, 191.

⁴⁸ Rosenwein, *A Short History of the Middle Ages*, 240.

⁴⁹ Adhémar of Chabannes, “Chronicle written in Angoulême in the 1020s,” in *The Birth of Popular Heresy*, by R. I. Moore (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 9-10.

social change in the long twelfth century developed a fear of change itself and of the potential for subversion by opportunist “enemy others.”⁵⁰

The fabric of Latin Christian civilization was rapidly evolving in the long twelfth century, which resulted in the development of fear and sense of crisis among the elite, whose continued dominance relied on a degree of stability and continuity. Fear of subversion by strange and untrustworthy outsiders harbored rhetoric promoting persecution of anyone who was not ideally Christian in the eyes of the central Church.⁵¹ The clerical elite was often less concerned with the lines between their “others” and more concerned with the distinction between those who were true Christians, “us,” and those who were not and had to be combatted, “them.” Nevertheless, discrete “other” categories in fact existed and were accordingly persecuted for distinct reasons as demonstrated throughout the current study.

⁵⁰ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 100-101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

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