

## **Christian Ambivalence, Heresy, and the Jews**

### **Introduction**

My initial question concerned the degree to which the Venetian Christians' attitudes toward the Jews were motivated by a fear of heresy. Did they react against the Jewish presence out of a fear that contact with the Jews could change Christian doctrine, allow in foreign doctrinal elements, practices, or interpretations? Along those lines, I was interested in seeing whether Christian persecution of Jews was exacerbated in early Catholic responses to the Protestant Reformers and during the official counter-reform movement. From what I've seen so far, this doesn't seem to be the most accurate interpretation – at least in Venice.

Part of what makes 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice unique is its sense of independence of the papacy, its fierce sense of its own superiority, and its economic pragmatism in trade. All of these contribute to the strength of the “myth of Venice”. So as far as interpreting a Christian response to Jews and to the Protestant Reformation, we have to clarify that Venice is not Rome. Venice's Inquisition, in fact, for a long time maintained lay authority over ecclesiastical members. The Venetian government considered the Pope more like a secular head of a political rival than the spiritual head of the culture. Therefore, it seems too simplistic to argue that Catholic reaction against Protestant Reform informed the Venetian treatment of the Jews. Where the Inquisition does engage the Jews is very specific – the questionable status of Marranos and the burning of the Talmud and other Jewish books. However, as far as broader attitudes toward the Jews and specific actions of persecution and violence, the concern with Jews seems to be not

one that revolves around heresy, but instead one that is motivated by ambivalence toward the self-certainty of the Venetian myth itself.

When talking about heresy and ambivalence, I am drawing a distinction between matters of religious doctrinal conflicts and matters of disturbing the security and self-certainty of being La Serenissima, of being the ideal. In the case of Venice, the presence of the Jews was experienced as a threat – not a threat explicitly to Christian doctrine, Christian numbers, Christian persons, or Christian bodies, but most centrally and basically, as a threat to the myth. Even while allowing the Jews residence unlike the vast majority of European states, there was still an ambivalence about this decision made in economic pragmatism. Such anxiety is evident in the repeated controversy over renewing the charters that allowed Jews to live in Venice, in the ghetto. Even in 1566, anxiety over the war with the Turks led many in the Senate to vote against renewing the charter with the Jews even though a previous charter prohibited such a future cancellation. It was of course part of the myth to be so supremely tolerant and pragmatic, virtuous and generous a Republic as to allow the “necessary evil” of the Jewish presence within the city. However, this was not easily digested, and continued treatment of Jews shows an anxiety toward the Venetian self-perception of security and certainty. Venice believed itself to be La Serenissima, but repeatedly lost its certainty about this, and this failure at certainty is manifested in the public dealings with the Jews.

I want to present four areas of this ambivalence toward Venetian self-certainty: (1) Christian art of the period; (2) political circumstances and moral considerations; (3) the concerns of the Inquisition in Venice; and (4) the separation and division of social groups.

## I. Christian Art

First, I will refer to two examples of Christian art of the period that display ambivalence towards how to respond to Jewish presence. Again, it is not just the Jewish presence itself, but rather the Christian community's ambivalence towards its tolerance of this Jewish presence. In describing Paola Uccello's predella of the Corpus Domini Altarpiece in Urbino, titled "Miracle of the Profaned Host" of 1468, Dana Katz explains that Uccello's detailed narrative cycle of six episodes shows clearly the brutal fate of the Jews who would desecrate the host, the Christians' compassion for one of their own, and the miracle of the host and the redemption available through it. The painting places side by side the blasphemous qualities of the Jew and the compassionate and redemptive qualities of the Christian Eucharist. In the Urbino altarpiece of 1468, the concern seems not so much to be doctrinal doubt about transubstantiation, but the danger posed by the blaspheming Jew and the triumph of the miraculous host over this danger.

In another article, Katz compares the depiction of the Jewish Norsa family in a Mantuan *Madonna and Child* piece of 1499 and the depiction of heretics in a 1323 *Triumph of St. Thomas* piece by Lippo Memmi. The visual iconography makes Jews and heretics interchangeable. In each case, they are placed at the bottom of the painting defeated or even trampled underfoot by the superiority of the Christian faith, suggesting that the fear and persecution of Jews was related to Christian vigilance over heresy. While this seems a valid argument during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the consequent fear over the next several decades of Turkish invasion and possible conquest of Christianity, it does not apply easily to the situation in Venice after 1516. With the foundation of the ghetto, the Jews become enclosed and

separated as intended by Venetian authorities. According to Eva Renzi, the negative depictions of Jews in Christian art decrease in number after 1517 as the concern turns more to the threats of Protestants and again the Turks.

These two examples demonstrate a concern with heresy in its negative depiction of Jews, whether of the danger of Jewish desecration of the host and all things Christian or the Christian victory over such a danger. They present a divine justice in the punishment of the Jews and the salvation of the Christians and work to reassure Christians that there was a difference and a separation between them. <<*Still, this may characterize the situation in the late 1400s, before the foundation of the ghetto in Venice in 1516. There is good reason for drawing a distinction between the period before the foundation of the ghetto and the period after, and perhaps also between the outlying cities with regional governments and Venice itself. With those two axes, it may be that in Venice, with the foundation of the ghetto, Venetian authorities actually succeeded in their program of maintaining separation between different groups of people, preventing the Jews from roaming freely through the city at night, and thereby alleviated at least partially the Christian anxiety about the Jews in their midst. With the foundation of the ghetto in 1516 and with Luther's 95 Theses in 1517, explicit heresy comes in the form of the Protestants.*>>

## **II. Political and Economic Climate**

The second area is the political and moral climate which then becomes displaced onto the Jews. Riccardo Calimani raises the question in *The Ghetto of Venice*, why the proposal for a residential seclusion of Jews failed in 1515 but succeeded in 1516. The optimism of 1515 was replaced in one year with the experience of military defeats and

consequent moralist judgments. Looking further than just that one year, we see that in 1501 the first cargo of pepper had arrived in Lisbon, warning of the change in the global economy and the transition away from the Adriatic, an enormous threat to Venetian supremacy. The economic threat and the experience of serious military defeats between 1507 and 1516 combined to a moralistic judgment of the city's own vices. Girolamo Pruli wrote that the city's nunneries were public bordellos of public whores, and that the sins of the whoring nuns and sodomites were bringing about the ruin of the Venetian state. Along with the seclusion of the Jews in the ghetto in 1516 to keep them from roaming the city at night and a segregation of other foreign peoples as well, there was also the reform of convents from 1509 to 1521. There was legislation prohibiting Christian noblewomen from dressing ostentatiously. Christian preaching taught that Venice, to survive, would have to atone for its sins, one of which was allowing Jews to live freely in the city. The ghettoization of the Jews served as an act of Christian expiation. The connection during this time between political and economic challenges, a moralistic judgment on Venice's sins, and the deflection onto Jewish presence supports the argument that what we're dealing with is a Venetian ambivalence towards its own self-certainty, toward its view of itself as the political, economic, and moral ideal. When there were tears in the fabric of this myth, action was taken on the Jews.

### **III. The Inquisition in Venice**

Third, the Inquisition in Venice seems to have been most concerned not with Jews as Jews, but with what is termed Judaizing and with certain kinds of contact between Jews and Christians. First of all, a very low number of cases actually dealt with Jews. We have record of 1565 cases between 1541 and 1600, after which they decline. Of

those 1565, 803 (51.3%) dealt with Lutheranism, 199 (15%) dealt with witchcraft, and 73 (or 4.7%) dealt with Judaism and the vague category of “judaizing”. Judaizing crimes applied as much to Christians who consorted with Jews as to Jews who crossed boundaries. Blurring the boundaries was the primary concern for heresy. Accusations include recent converts fleeing from the House of Catechumens where conversions took place, attempting to convert a Christian to Judaism, employing Christian servants in the ghetto, owning forbidden books, printing unlicensed books, sexual relations between Christians and Jews, undergoing repeat baptisms, performing exorcisms of Christians, insulting Christian preachers, striking Christian porters of the ghetto, or living outside the ghetto. (Pier Cesare Ily Zorattini, “Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition” in Davis and Ravid, eds. *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*)

One Christian, who was charged with frequenting the ghetto at night, participating in Jewish public holidays and private festivities, and wearing a Jewish yellow head covering, claimed he was trying to convert a Jewish woman, but he was sentenced to 3 years of rowing in the galleys. In one case, Jews in the ghetto were charged with attempting to convert their Moorish servants, but the court couldn’t prove anything.

The Jews who most troubled the Venetian authorities were Marranos, crypto-Jews, and those new Christians who did revert to Judaism upon entering Venice and finding there a tolerated Jewish community. Again, the Christian problem was not with those born Jewish who stayed clearly Jewish. The problem was the confusion posed by the questionable religious identity of these marginal groups. If they were Jewish, they could live freely in the ghetto as the other; if they were Christian, they needed to be the same as other Christians. Remember this happens along with the Reformation in

Germany. The problem was the confusion of having different kinds of Christianity and the need to preserve sameness within Christianity and to have clearly delineated boundaries between different religious groups. Once the Jews were securely enclosed inside the ghetto, the Venetians did not care what they did or what they practiced as long as they stayed separate from Christians. They were finally allowed to build synagogues, for example. The Inquisition, even in the very few cases that dealt with Jews at all, concerned some kind of crossing of boundaries between religious groups or blurring of religious identity.

#### **IV. Seclusion of foreign peoples and segregation of social groups**

Fourth is the Venetian political need to maintain clearly delineated social boundaries between different groups of people. Not only Jews, but also Germans, Turks, and Greeks were secluded from the rest of the public space of Venice. In the case of the German Fondaco, the city's control had both a commercial basis and a cultural-religious basis. Keeping them in one place made surveillance easier, both economic surveillance and then after 1531 internal surveillance through spies amidst the Germans to detect signs of heresy. (Sennett 231) In contrast, there was no internal surveillance of the Jews.

The government took seriously the economic advantages of welcoming these foreign peoples and the trade they brought with them. Still, its isolation of them was both pragmatic and part of a more general policy of marking clearly the different classes of people. For example, some of the more unsuccessful legislation included efforts to clearly segregate prostitutes from other citizens, whether by restricting their work to certain districts and out of other respectable areas, requiring yellow veils for prostitutes and Jewish women, prohibiting some class of women from wearing earrings, or requiring

other classes of women to wear earrings. (Sennett and Shamek) The concern was the separation and clear public delineation of social identity.

### **Conclusion**

To restate my basic argument, which, again, is a hypothesis, the Venetian Christian dealings with the Jews during the 16<sup>th</sup> century indicate an ambivalence that is not primarily a fear of religious heresy. In their toleration and segregation of the Jews in the city, the Venetians demonstrate ambivalence toward an external threat and toward their own sense of absolute superiority. The confrontation with the other, in the case of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, caused subtle breaks in self-certainty, subtle tears in the fabric of the “Myth of Venice”.

Looking forward from here, what I find interesting about 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice is that it seems to be a prototype for a very modern kind of state, in its economic pragmatism, in its global orientation, in enabling an early type of capitalism, and in claiming the most serene Republic and selling such a myth successfully to its citizens. Other states of its time were absolutist as well, but they didn’t sell such a myth with such success. They did fiercely attack heresy and difference of all kinds, but they didn’t have the tension and ambivalence toward these differences in their midst that we see in Venice. The way in which Venice propagated its myth of La Serenissima and reacted against others in its midst in ambivalence toward its myth makes it an interesting parallel to contemporary states.