

JEW, INDIAN, AND THE IDENTITY OF CHRISTIAN EUROPE

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Since graduate school, when I was inspired especially by the linked discussions of anti-Semitism and European colonialism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans., John Cumming [1972]), I have been convinced that Jewish difference was critical to the formation of what came to be called "Christian Europe" and, a fortiori, to the very possibility of an encounter between that Christian Europe and its colonial "Others." For almost as long, I have found interdisciplinary scholarship on postcolonial experience and culture indispensable to my thinking and research on Jewishness in Modernity and beyond. I had decided to study Jews in and through the discipline of anthropology, yet found to my frustration that those scholars in anthropology and other regions of interdisciplinary cultural studies whose work inspired me seemed to find both Jews as an object of study, and the study of Jews, to be of little interest to the emerging discourse of intercultural postcoloniality.

My current project, whose provisional title is *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians and the Identity of Christian Europe*, aims to historicize and articulate my conviction (to which I claim no copyright) about the relevance of Jewishness and postcoloniality to each other. It will be a short book on a very large topic. The subtitle contains four big nouns:

1 "Jews": A term or figure that, in this book, refers to a group whose continued existence disturbs the ideal of a unified and universal

Christendom, and onto whom the phantom substance of that which is to be excluded from Christendom is consequently projected;

2 "Indians": Here meaning native peoples of the New

World, not those of the subcontinent, the very possibility of confusion highlighting again the aspect of European projection of identity onto a collective Other;

3 "Identity": A theme closely related to that of the self, and a discourse (as Charles Taylor argued in *Sources of the Self* [1989]) whose history is closely tied to that of Christianity and the so-called West; and

4 "Christian Europe": That commonplace of schoolbook historiography which, upon close examination, turns out to be neither so natural nor so self-assured as it initially appears.

At the inception of the project, more than fifteen years ago, two then-impending events loomed large. One was the cinquecentennial of Columbus's first voyage. The second was a major new effort to unite Europe commercially, culturally, and politically. Both of those events inspired rich scholarship and polemical journalism on questions of tolerance and boundaries in Europe's past. Trying to think these matters from a critical Jewish perspective, I sensed that it would be both possible and worthwhile to examine how structures of Jew exclusion in late medieval Europe were related to the encounter between Spanish colonists and native Indians in the New World, especially in the century or so immediately following Columbus's voyage. No less insightful a writer than Tzvetan Todorov had hinted at such a connection:

Columbus himself constantly links

the two events. "In this present year 1492, after Your Highnesses have brought to an end the war against the Moors... [and] after having driven all the Jews out of your realms and dominions, Your Highnesses in this same month of January commanded me to set out with a sufficient armada to the said countries of India," he writes at the head of the journal of the first voyage...

Unfortunately Todorov never returns to this coincidence in his book on *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1984), which is largely concerned with an explanation of Cortés's victory through reference to the semiological superiority of the Europeans, whose "literacy" is contrasted with the Mexicans' supposedly omen-haunted, cyclical understanding of time. From this account, all we have is a poignant hint at something more to be studied and thought—but even the possibility of that further exploration is discouraged by the reinforced trope of the Jews as an "old," expelled Other, the Indians as encountered as pure novelty, without precedent in imagination.

I was convinced that this could not be the end of the story—a conviction inseparable from my belief that the "dominant" group identity itself—what I am calling here Christian Europe—must be understood as a *project* worked out, always tenuously and (for all its boastful rhetoric) with more or less anxiety, largely in the encounters with various sets of collective Others: not only Jews and Indians, and not only these along with (famously) Muslims, but many "other Others" as well. Focusing on the Spanish and their encounter with New World Indians, however, gave me a good reason to explore the wonderful writing already being done, by historians (such as Anthony Pagden, Inga Clendinnen and Sabine MacCormack), literary scholars (such as Rolena Adorno), and anthropologists (such as Michael Taussig), on the dynamics of the colonial encounter in Latin America.

More particularly, it gave me the chance to juxtapose Jews as an Other “inside” Europe to an Other encountered as a result of a European voyage outward, while at the same time anchoring the juxtaposition more particularly in the encounter of Spanish Catholic rulers, bureaucrats and clerics with different kinds of threatening and sometimes fascinating outsiders.

Yet when I began, the pertinence of the juxtaposition of Jews and Indians as foils for Christian European identity was anything but obvious to many scholars. The conceptual gap between questions of Jewishness and questions of colonialism became starkly clear to me in a conversation, during the summer of 1988, with Edward Said. The winter before he had delivered a keynote address to the American Anthropological Association on “Anthropology and Its Interlocutors” (later published in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1989). There, with his wonted eloquence, he articulated the stark power differential between anthropologists and those whom they most commonly studied. Over coffee at the Hanover Inn in New England, I explained to him that I had chosen to study east European Jews in large part precisely because I did not want to be one of those “colonial” anthropologists. “Well, that’s different,” he said with a shrug that I took as both absolute and dismissal. It seemed that I had failed to convince him that my case was a distinction that made a difference—perhaps because he saw the Jews of eastern Europe as being neither of the west European metropole, nor of the colonized periphery.

My frustration and fascination increased throughout that summer, as I participated in Said’s seminar on colonialism and literature. My impression was that for many scholars (such as those who had edited the rich collection of essays published in the early 1980s under the title *Europe and Its Others*), “Europe” was somehow taken as a given entity, one moreover which had first encountered its geographically external Others after 1492. Implicitly, Jewish history, even if

somehow distinct, was contained within the given history of Europe, and thus analytically irrelevant to the dynamics of the colonial encounter. Even more egregious, to my mind, were those works that traced the origins of Western colonizing restlessness to the Biblical account of Exodus and its supposedly concomitant heritage of religious and ethnic intolerance.

Such, roughly, was the state of discourse when this project began. Now, returning to the manuscript after years of enforced delays, I find myself in a fortunate position. To my relief, no one has quite written the book that I hope finally to complete soon. At the same time, I have access to a rich new lode of scholarship, as researchers articulate new questions about contingencies of identity and difference in the medieval and early modern periods, within and across boundaries religious, ethnic, and geographical. This scholarship is located both within and without the scope of Jewish cultural studies—though that boundary, too, should be questioned as the interconnection of so many collective identities becomes increasingly clear.

A few bullet points must suffice here to illustrate the implicit convergence of Jewish, Christian European, and colonial historiographies, yet the list is anything but exhaustive.

- Miri Rubin’s *Gentile Tales* (1999) analyzes medieval stories about host desecration by Jews “told by Christians, to Christians, to make Christians act and redefine that which made them Christian” as proof, not of distance, but indeed “of the intimacy which prevailed between the two groups” (5).
- David Nirenberg, in “Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jews and Christians in Fifteenth-Century Spain,” *Past and Present* 174 (Feb. 2002), examines the early modern Iberian obsession with genealogy as a product of shared “Christian” and “Jewish” anxiety about the boundaries between these two collectives.
- Lucy Pick’s *Conflict and Coexistence*

(2004) examines how a late medieval archbishop of Toledo reconciled his desire for Christian unity with a rationale for the continued presence of Jews and Muslims.

- Barbara Fuchs’s *Mimesis and Empire* (2001) examines the play of projections among Muslim, Indian, and Spanish identities in the sixteenth century.
- Osvaldo Pardo’s *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism* (2004) poignantly describes the dilemmas of a handful of priests anxiously trying to convey the “good word” to thousands of natives, yet it avoids the triumphalism of older missionary histories.
- Walden Browne’s *Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity* (2000) argues persuasively that a missionary hailed as a proto-anthropologist actually attempted (and necessarily failed) to create a medieval *summa* of Nahua culture.
- Kathleen Biddick’s *The Typological Imaginary* (2003) examines graphic evidence of the project of spatial and temporal abjection of Jews, and provocatively ties historians’ efforts at periodization to the entire heritage of Christian supersessionism.

This kind of work, among other benefits, helps illuminate how it is possible to focus closely on Jewish experience without remaining bound to a conception of a neatly delimited and separate Jewish history. More broadly, it shows with crystal clarity that human collectives are not given, but made, and once made still have to be always remade. It shows as well that politics is as much a matter of gesture, accent, and foodways as it is of mountain ranges and weapons. From this continuing, implicitly collaborative effort, specialists in Jewish studies still have much to learn; to that effort, as by now it should go without saying, we still have much to contribute.

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