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Minorities and Persecution

Abstract

The history of minorities in the Middle Ages is characterised by alternating periods of persecution and uneasy coexistence. The main dividing line between the majority and minority was not ethnicity but religion. Jews and Muslims were religious minorities whose existence in Christian realms was permitted on condition that strict segregation was maintained between religious groups. The reason was practical: forced conversion or mass expulsions of conquered Muslim populations were not plausible solutions. The attitudes towards Jews turned increasingly hostile in the Late Middle Ages, resulting in mass expulsions from, for example, England, France and Spain.

Christian heresies were not tolerated, but ecclesiastical and secular authorities persecuted heretical groups with few exceptions. Many heretics were not from minority groups but were individual religious radicals; the Cathars and Waldensians especially developed a social structure and sense of identity and shared history, in part formed by the Church's persecution, and can be considered religious minorities. Other types of minorities were ethnic groups living at the margins of Christendom and interacting with it, such as the Sámi in northern Fennoscandia and, from the fifteenth century onwards, various 'Gypsy' groups arriving from the Ottoman empire into Eastern and Western Europe. While sexual minorities were not defined groups of people or identities in the Middle Ages, those deviating from sexual norms were occasionally persecuted.

Scholarship has approached violence against minorities both as a defining development and characteristic of medieval European culture and as a political conflict and negotiation at the level of individual communities. In either case, minority history is not only about marginal groups but also about how the majority defined itself against 'the other'. The historiography of Iberia has debated whether *convivencia* or conflict was characteristic of medieval Spain. The greatest challenge in the study of minorities is that most of the sources were written from a hostile perspective. Therefore, scholars have developed a range of strategies to interpret sources such as inquisition depositions and polemical treatises.

1. Medieval Minorities: Jews and Muslims

In medieval Latin Christendom, the most important dividing line between the majority population and the minorities was being Christian and adhering to the minimum religious and

social norms that came with it. Ethnic and linguistic divisions, prejudices and conflicts existed, but in the fragmented political reality of medieval Europe, it was more of a rule than an exception that a political unit consisted of several peoples and languages. If these peoples belonged to the same faith, such a situation was relatively unproblematic for authorities. A modern perspective on historical minorities emphasises their status as victims of persecution to various degrees, but it is necessary to bear in mind that there were ethnic minorities in privileged positions, such as German merchants in the Baltic or Eastern Central Europe, where they formed the wealthy urban elite. The focus of this entry is, however, on the persecuted minorities. There was no equivalent of the modern concept of 'minority' in the Middle Ages, but several groups can be characterised as minorities according to the modern conception.

Jews, living in Western Europe since Roman Antiquity, had a special status in the eyes of Christian theologians and authorities. The pitiful status of Jews in the diaspora was a reminder of Christianity's victory, and therefore the presence of Jews among Christian communities was permitted. As money-lending between Christians was prohibited as usury, Jews had a special socio-economic function as creditors. Iberian monarchs, in particular, trusted administrative duties, for example tax collection, to their influential and wealthy Jewish subjects. Therefore, in the hatred and violence against Jews, religious motives were entangled with political and financial ones: Jews could simultaneously represent Christ-killers, usurers, and royal fiscal administrators. In the late Middle Ages, attitudes towards Jews became increasingly intolerant: the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306 – where they were granted re-entry in 1315 and expelled again in 1394 – and from Spain in 1492.

Muslims became the subjects of Christian rulers through the advance of the Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula, Norman conquest of Sicily, and the establishment of the Crusader States in the eastern Mediterranean in the wake of the First Crusade. Until the late fifteenth century, Muslims in the conquered areas were allowed to keep and practise their faith. In some areas, such as the late medieval kingdom of Aragon, the Muslim population was an essential and valued part of the agricultural workforce.

While the Jews and Muslims were allowed to practise their faith and forced conversion was not desired, it is anachronistic to speak about religious toleration in the Middle Ages. A multi-religious realm was not desirable to medieval rulers but was a practical necessity. In theory, forced conversion was prohibited by the Church and, in practice, impossible to execute. Mass expulsions would have depopulated recently conquered regions with significant Muslim populations.

Where different religious groups lived as neighbours, a strict division was enforced at the legislative level, if not always followed in practice. The Fourth Lateran Council promulgated in 1215 that Muslims and Jews 'of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times be distinguished in public from other people by a difference of dress' (canon 68), and similar rules were repeatedly enforced in secular and ecclesiastical decrees. The pressing fear that motivated such legislation was the possibility of mistaken religious identity and, above all, sexual mixing (Constable, 2018: 18–19). Guarding sexual boundaries, especially those around women, was an essential part of the uneasy coexistence of Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities (Nirenberg, 1998: 127–67; 2014: 89–116). The Jews and Muslims were subject to special taxes, and their religious rites were not to cause scandal among the Christian population. In many ways, the status of the Jews and Muslims in the Christian realms was comparable to that of the *dhimmī*, i.e. non-Muslims living in the Muslim realms protected by the law and allowed to practise their religion.

How common were multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities in medieval Europe? Many cities and towns, also north of the Alps, had Jewish residents. In the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily and the Holy Land, there were areas and settlements with significant Christian, Jewish and Muslim populations. In the Mediterranean metropoles and pilgrimage sites of Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome, Europeans could encounter Arab and African Christians. However, these multi-religious communities were, in a broader perspective, exceptions. Most European Christians in the Middle Ages never encountered representatives of any other faith, and the same applies to their Muslim counterparts (Nirenberg, 2014: 6). The Jews' experience, of course, was completely different: they always lived as a minority in either Muslim or Christian realms.

2. Medieval minorities: Heretics

Unlike coexistence with the Jews and Muslims, coexistence with Christian heresies was not deemed possible. The Church and secular authorities relentlessly persecuted persons and groups condemned as heretical. Not all heretics can be regarded as minorities. Before the thirteenth century, heretics were individuals who consciously and publicly promulgated teachings against approved Catholic doctrine, such as scholars whose ideas were too original or radical popular preachers. Moreover, heresy was a charge that a minority could raise against the majority, or indeed any Christian, Muslim or Jew against their brothers and sisters in faith (C. C. Ames, 2015). Such charges could have social, legal or religious consequences for their targets, but such negotiations of faith did not automatically create religious minorities.

However, some dissident groups in medieval Europe developed a sense of identity, shared history and lifestyle, and these can be described as religious minorities. The nature of dualist heresy in Southern France and Northern Italy, commonly known as Catharism, has been intensely debated by scholars (Sennis, 2016). There is, however, no denying that since at least the late twelfth century, there existed groups of people who believed that the Roman Church had erred, that the material world was corrupted and that their faith and lifestyle formed the only path to salvation. Since the Albigensian crusade (1209–1229) and the subsequent establishment of the first papal inquisitors in Languedoc, the persecution only strengthened the division between the Catholic majority and the heretical minority. The developing legislation and inquisitorial praxis against the crime of heresy contributed to the formation of certain heresies, Catharism and Waldensianism in particular, into 'sects' with leaders and followers. Because 'believers' (*credentes*) in heresy started to be prosecuted in the same way as those teaching and declaring heresy, attending sermons or rituals led by Waldensian Brethren or Cathar Good Men started to signify belonging to their faith. In this sense, the persecution of heretics constructed and created heresy. Such constructions of heretical sects of leaders and followers were not completely imaginary but corresponded to the lived experience of the dissident communities.

The late medieval Waldensians, in particular, lived as a persecuted religious minority. Originating in the conversion of a rich man, Valdés in Lyon, in the 1170s, the Waldensians had contempt for the wealth of the Church and all the practices and doctrines they regarded as a dilution of the personal satisfaction of sins in this world: indulgences, intercession by saints, masses for the dead and Purgatory. In the late Middle Ages, the largest Waldensian communities were in German-speaking Europe and the south-western Alps. Whether relatively poor rural workers and artisans in Brandenburg and Pomerania or wealthy merchant families in the Rhineland and Swiss cities, the German Waldensians led double lives, participating in Catholic services but confessing their sins to itinerant Brethren. They had a sense of shared identity and (imagined) history as the persecuted true followers of the Apostles that had not taken part in the corruption that the Donation of Constantine had brought to the Church. The German Waldensians were occasionally persecuted, but their communities persisted until the inquisitions of the 1390s and early 1400s broke down their social and religious structure. Another late medieval heartland of the Waldensians was in the Alpine valleys of Piedmont and the Dauphiné, where the Waldensians had lived since the late thirteenth century. Protected by the rugged terrain and political rivalries in the area, the Waldensians were able to ward off both inquisitors and crusaders in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They survived into the

sixteenth century and joined the Protestant reformation, transforming from a medieval heretical sect into reformed minority religion in the primarily Catholic lands.

3. Medieval minorities: lepers, ethnic and sexual minorities

Lepers were a conspicuous minority, feared and segregated from the body social in the Middle Ages. Leprosy or Hansen's disease, caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, can cause in its advanced stages skin lesions, deformities and loss of sensation. In the Middle Ages, leprosy was thought to be highly infectious, which is not the case. The fear of infection, together with the fact that leprosy was difficult to diagnose with the means available to medieval doctors, meant that many other skin diseases were probably treated as leprosy in addition to leprosy proper. A social stigma was attached to leprosy because the medieval reception of Graeco-Roman medicine and patristic exegesis combined into one disease the Greek *lepra* and the disfiguring skin disease *tsara'ath* mentioned in the Book of Leviticus (chap. 13–14) – which probably was not leprosy – whose carriers were to be excluded from the community. Leprosy was associated with sin and sexual promiscuity, and it was thought to be transmitted through sexual contact. From the Crusader States to Scandinavia, the usual practice throughout Europe was to segregate lepers from the rest of society in special hospitals, *leprosaria* (Zimmerman 2008).

Another type of minority were the ethnic groups that lived on the geographical and social margins of medieval Christendom, interacting with but not integrated into it. The Scandinavians taxed and traded with the Sámi people in northern Fennoscandia. The recently converted Scandinavians described the Sámi as nomadic pagans, but efforts to convert them began only in the early modern period. In the fifteenth century, groups of travellers arrived from the Ottoman Empire and settled in the Balkans, Wallachia, Moldavia and further on in Western Europe. Historically, these people were most often known as 'Gypsies', and under this term were included also travelling groups that did not share the Romani languages and culture. Therefore, it might be preferable to follow B. Taylor (2014) in using the term 'Gypsy' when discussing historical material of the late medieval and early modern period and 'Roma' for more recent developments.

Sexual minorities are a challenging category for medieval studies because medieval people did not have concepts for homosexuality, heterosexuality or any other sexual orientation. As Ruth Mazo Karras has pointed out, sexual status was important in the Middle Ages, but the dividing lines went between chaste as against sexually active people and between those participating in reproductive sex as against non-reproductive (Karras 2017). Furthermore,

completely different discourses governed expressions of same-sex love and intimate friendship, which was common and valued in medieval society, and same-sex sexual desire, which was condemned and punished as the sin of sodomy (Linkinen 2015). While speaking about medieval sexual minorities is anachronistic, people were certainly persecuted because of their sexual acts. At times, eradicating deviant sexual behaviour became a major issue of moral reform, such as in the repeated campaigns against sodomy in fifteenth-century Florence.

4. Major research questions in the study of minorities and persecution

It is impossible to cover here the scholarly debates about each medieval minority. Instead, the focus is on broader debates that have touched the study of minorities and persecution.

First, there is the question of whether European culture became increasingly intolerant at some point in its medieval history. Such research questions were inspired by the post-holocaust intellectual climate in Europe. Three studies, in particular, engaged the European 'persecuting society', as the title of one of them called it, at an unconscious, almost psychoanalytical level. The first was N. Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), followed by R. I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987), and Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies* (1990). The studies differed in their emphases, but Cohn and Moore in particular focused on structures, collective images and othering stereotypes and proposed that at some point in the Middle Ages, society as a whole started to persecute minorities more than before. The persecution of those on society's margins – heretics, Jews, Muslims, gays, prostitutes, and witches – originated in the changing attitudes of the European intellectual and political elites.

Grand narratives leave ample room for criticism, and there are reasonable grounds to claim that the above-mentioned studies neglected both the agency of individuals and groups, as well as local and regional social, economic, political and cultural variables. D. Nirenberg in his studies on the Christian–Jewish–Muslim relations in medieval Iberia has criticised this aspect in Cohn, Moore, and Ginzburg and has demonstrated that hostile discourses gained valency only when someone decided to use them. For example, violence against Jews was not irrational lynching by the mob but rather a way to rebel against the Crown's fiscal administration, in which Jews played a decisive role, and which subjects of the Crown were unable to attack directly (Nirenberg 1998, 2014).

Despite the differences between the grand narratives of persecution and studies focusing on the level of individual communities and actors, both approaches have demonstrated that minority history is not (only) a history of society's margins. Persecution of minorities impacted on society as a whole, as the Christian majority defined itself against dissidents and infidels.

That said, the history of minorities also has an emancipatory and identity function for those minorities that still exist. There is a strong tradition of Jewish studies. In the field of heresy studies, for example, the learned society Società di Studi Valdesi is not only an upholder of Waldensian cultural heritage but an established scholarly publisher.

An essential and loaded term in the study of medieval minorities is *convivencia,* 'living-together-ness', meaning the coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the medieval Iberian Peninsula. The term originates from the debates about what Spain and Spanishness are. In 1948, the philologist Américo Castro proposed that the centuries of *convivencia* had created a Spanish hybrid culture, distinct from the rest of Europe. In Castro's view, medieval Iberia was a model of religious toleration, while his opponent, Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, saw that Spanish culture was above all characterised by conflict and that Jews and Muslims had had little impact on Spanish civilisation. These views, emphasising either co-operation or persecution, have since competed in the scholarship (Ray 2005; Abate 2015). *Convivencia* has also started to mean a methodology, an examination of inter-religious relations as a facilitator of historical change (Abate 2015).

Much of the scholarship on medieval minorities, including this entry, has been written from the perspective of Western Christendom. This reflects both the imbalance of the preserved medieval sources, the majority of which represent the Catholic perspective, and the emphases of the scholars who have worked on the topic. As C. C. Ames has demonstrated, it is fruitful to change the view and approach research problems such as heresy as a shared phenomenon between Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Ames 2015).

5. Sources and their interpretation

The greatest challenge in studying the persecuted minorities is that most sources describing them are inherently hostile, written by their persecutors. The rich archival material from the late medieval Iberian kingdoms, describing a wide variety of legal disputes between Christians, Jews and Muslims, is an exception. In most cases, a researcher encounters the representatives of minorities as the accused in inquisition depositions or as caricatures in polemical treatises.

The inquisition depositions for the medieval period are focused on heretics, only occasionally featuring cases of sexual sins and witchcraft. In the late fifteenth century, the situation changed, with increasing attention paid to witches and, in the Spanish Inquisition, to Muslim and Jewish converts. The fundamental source-critical essays by H. Grundmann on interpreting inquisitorial sources are now available in English translation (Grundmann 2019). C. Ginzburg's methodology on identifying 'filters' that distort the historical reality and

'surplus' features escaping the filters have also been influential (Ginzburg 1992; Bruschi 2009). J. H. Arnold has been the leading postmodern critic of this approach, emphasising the power of the inquisitors' discourse in shaping the depositions (Arnold 2001).

The prevailing approach on medieval polemics against religious minorities is to study how the construction of 'the other' contributed to the identity and self-image of the author's own community. D. Iogna-Prat's book on Peter the Venerable's polemics is a perfect example (Iogna-Prat, 2002). The widespread scepticism about the possibilities of reading the lived historical reality from polemical descriptions is well justified. However, in some cases, as with Moneta of Cremona's Cathars, the polemical treatises contain valuable first-hand accounts by careful and accurate medieval scholars (Sackville 2016). It would be unwise to disregard them as merely hostile constructions.

6. Future directions

There is a need for further challenging of the Western European perspective to medieval minorities and persecution, in the way of the trailblazer study by C. C. Ames (2015). Comparative studies are required for two purposes: first, to participate in the research of the Global Middle Ages (Heng 2021), as global problems and an increasingly diverse student body have made exclusively European perspectives outdated; second, to rethink the systemic and structural causes of persecution. There is a popular and academic tendency to regard medieval Latin Christendom as particularly inclined to persecution; but to genuinely asses the validity of this preconception, deriving from Cohn's and Moore's paradigm, more comparative and collaborative studies about the status and treatment of minorities are required.

Another emerging research area is the application of computational tools in the study of persecution. Digital humanities is now a solidly established field also in medieval studies; pertinent to the subject of this article, computational methods have been applied, for example, to study the authorship of polemical treatises (Välimäki et al. 2020) and to conduct social network analyses of dissident communities (Nieto-Isabel and López-Arenillas 2021). A broader integration of structured data, modelling and statistical analysis, including topographical data (Mertel and Zbíral 2019), is a major research endeavour for the near future.

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Related articles [*suggestion, not sure what is actually included*]:
Jews; Muslims; Sexuality; Disability history; Heresy; Herbert Grundmann