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Religion and the Invention of Racism

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It is the dominant view among scholars who have studied conceptions of difference in the ancient world that no concept truly equivalent to that of “race” can be detected in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians. The Greeks distinguished between the civilized and the barbarous, but these categories do not seem to have been regarded as hereditary. One was civilized if one was fortunate enough to live in a city-state and participate in political life, barbarous if one lived rustically under some form of despotic rule.¹ The Romans had slaves representing all the colors and nationalities found on the frontiers of their empire and citizens of corresponding diversity from among those who were free and proffered their allegiance to the republic or the emperor.² After extensive research, the classical scholar Frank Snowden could find no evidence that dark skin color served as the basis of invidious distinctions anywhere in the ancient world. The early Christians, for example, celebrated the conversion of Africans as evidence for their faith in the spiritual equality of all human beings.³

It would of course be stretching a point to claim that there was no ethnic prejudice in antiquity. The refusal of dispersed Jews to accept the religious and cultural hegemony of the gentile nations or empires within which they resided sometimes aroused hostility against them. But abandoning their ethnoreligious exceptionalism and worshipping the local divinities (or accepting Christianity once it had been established) was an option open to them that would have eliminated most of the Otherness that made them unpopular. Jews created a special problem for Christians because of the latter's belief that the New Testament superseded the Old, and that the refusal of Jews to recognize Christ as the Messiah was preventing the triumph of the gospel. Anti-Judaism was endemic to Christianity from the beginning, but since the founders of their religion were themselves Jews, it would have been difficult for early Christians to claim that there was something inherently defective about Jewish blood or ancestry. Nonetheless there was an undeniable tendency to consider the Jews who had not converted when Christ was among them as a corporate group that bore a direct responsibility for the Crucifixion. "For the organization of Christianity," writes the French historian Léon Poliakov, "it was essential that the Jews be a criminally guilty people."⁴ In Matthew 27:25 Jews who called for the death of Christ cry out after the deed has been done: "His blood be upon us and our Children."

The notion that Jews were collectively and hereditarily responsible for the worst possible human crime—deicide—created a powerful incentive for persecution. If it had been believed that the curse fell on individual Jews in such a way that they could never be absolved of it, racism would be a

proper term for the prejudice against them. But the doctrine, as expounded by Saint Augustine and others, that the conversion of the Jews was a Christian duty and essential to the salvation of the world meant that the great hereditary sin was not an indelible and insurmountable source of difference. Anti-Judaism became antisemitism whenever it turned into a consuming hatred that made getting rid of Jews seem preferable to trying to convert them, and antisemitism became racism when the belief took hold that Jews were intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions.⁵

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the attitudes of European Christians toward Jews became more hostile in ways that laid a foundation for the racism that later developed. Once welcomed as international merchants and traders, Jews were increasingly forced by commercial competition from Christian merchant guilds into the unpopular and putatively sinful occupation of lending money at interest. But in this period of intense religiosity, it was the spiritual threat Jews allegedly represented that inspired most of the violence against them. Massacres of Jews began at the time of the First Crusade in 1096. In a few communities, mobs, stirred up by the rhetoric associated with the campaign to redeem the Holy Land from Muslims, turned on local Jews. Later Crusades stimulated more such pogroms. The church and the civil authorities viewed Muslims as a political and military threat to Christendom, while Jews had seemed to them to be relatively harmless and even somewhat useful. The church valued the presence of dispersed and suffering Jews as witnesses to divine revelation, and rulers sometimes employed them as fiscal agents. Consequently the ruling

powers tried, with varying degrees of conviction and success, to protect Jews from the murderous mobs and roving bands that perpetrated violence against them in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But even the mobs did not regard Jews as beyond redemption. Most historians affirm that to be baptized rather than killed was a real option. That so many Jews chose to die was a testament to the strength of their own faith and that of their executioners rather than a prelude to the Holocaust.⁶

Nevertheless, in the heat of killing Jews and pillaging their communities, some must have questioned the notion that Jews had souls to be saved, and that they chose to be the way they were rather than being naturally and irredeemably perverse. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a folk mythology had taken root that could put Jews outside the pale of humanity by literally demonizing them. The first claim that Jews had crucified a Christian child for ritual purposes was made in England around 1150. Other such accusations followed in England and elsewhere, often combined with the assertion that Jews required Christian blood for their most sacred ceremonies. After the doctrine of transubstantiation was made an article of faith in 1215 came the most bizarre charge of all. Despite the traditional notion that the Jews' principal deficiency was their lack of a belief in the divinity of Christ, some of them were accused of stealing the consecrated host from Christian churches and torturing it, thus repeating their original crime of torturing and killing Jesus. (This myth presumed that what was wrong with Jews was not their unbelief but rather their evil disposition; like Satan himself they seemingly knew

very well that Christ was the Son of God but nonetheless arrayed themselves against him.)⁷

Increasingly in popular mythology, folklore, and iconography, an association was made between Jews and the Devil or between Jews and witchcraft. In the popular mind of the late Middle Ages, the problem presented by Jews was not so much their unbelief as their malevolent intent against Christians and their willingness to enlist the Powers of Darkness in their conspiracies.⁸ The highest authorities in the church for the most part repudiated such fantasies and generally adhered to the principle that the existence of Jews must be tolerated because their ultimate conversion was essential to God's plan for the salvation of the world. But the popular belief that all Jews were in league with the Devil scarcely encouraged a firm conviction that they were fellow human beings. According to Cecil Roth, a pioneer historian of medieval antisemitism, the Jews' "deliberate unbelief" made them seem "less than human" and "capable of any crime imaginable or unimaginable."⁹ The verdict of Joshua Trachtenberg, author of the classic study of medieval associations of Jews with the Devil, was similar: "Not being a human being but a demonic, a diabolic beast fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan's weapons, was the Jew as medieval Europe saw him."¹⁰ Although more recent historians of medieval antisemitism have found this picture to be exaggerated if taken literally, at least some medieval Christians—a substantial minority, if not an actual majority—undoubtedly felt this way about Jews.¹¹ The terminology and frame of reference continued to be religious, but the conception of Jews as willing accomplices of Satan

meant, at least to the unsophisticated, that they were beyond redemption and should probably be killed or at least expelled from Christendom.¹²

At the time of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, thousands of Jews were massacred in those countries that had not already expelled them, because of a widespread belief that Christians were dying, not because of disease, but because Jews had poisoned the wells. Peculiar to the denigration of the Jews over the centuries, whether asimps of Satan, international financiers, or fomenters of world revolution, has been the role of mass paranoia. Intense irrational fears have been somewhat less central to the racialization of other groups, who were more likely to be viewed with a mixture of contempt and condescension.¹³ Jews have again and again served as scapegoats for whatever fears and anxieties were uppermost in the minds of antisemites. Medieval Christians were concerned with the growth of market economies, the enhancement of state power and bureaucracy, and threats to religious orthodoxy from a variety of quarters. Perhaps, as Gavin Langmuir has suggested, some were beginning to doubt their own faith and needed to be reassured by the kind of militancy that hating and persecuting Jews (or heretics) signified.¹⁴ Always a scavenger ideology, racism reared its ugly head in this instance by adopting the garb of Christianity while implicitly repudiating its offer of salvation to all of humanity, including Jews. Medieval antisemitism is sometimes distinguished from its modern manifestations on the grounds that it functioned in a society premised on hierarchy, and that discrimination against Jews was merely part of a general pattern of group inequality. But to the extent that Jews

were relegated to pariah status and isolated from the larger society, they became external to the official hierarchy of estates or status groups and therefore became truly Other and expendable. The premise of equality that operated for Christians was that all were equal in the eyes of God, whatever their earthly station. Those medieval Christians who viewed Jews as children of the Devil in effect excluded them from membership in the human race for which Christ had died on the cross. (They also excluded non-Jewish witches and heretics, but not because of their ethnicity.) The scriptural passage most often quoted to associate Jews as a collectivity with Satan was Christ's denunciation of the Jews who rejected him: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (John 8:44 RSV).

The historian Robert Bartlett has argued that the racism or protoracism of the late Middle Ages extended well beyond the Jews. As the core of Catholic Europe expanded, conquering and colonizing the periphery of the continent, attitudes of superiority to indigenous populations anticipated the feelings of dominance and entitlement that would characterize the later expansion of Europeans into Asia, Africa, and the Americas. If the demonization of the Jews established some basis for the racial antisemitism of the modern era, the prejudice and discrimination directed at the Irish on one side of Europe and certain Slavic peoples on the other foreshadowed the dichotomy between civilization and savagery that would characterize imperial expansion beyond the European continent. "On all the newly settled, conquered or converted peripheries," Bartlett writes, "one can find the subjugation of native populations to legal disabilities, the attempt to enforce residential segre-

gation, with natives expelled into the 'Irishtowns' of colonial Ireland, and the attempt to proscribe certain cultural forms of native society. Ghettoization and racial discrimination marked the later centuries of the Middle Ages."¹⁵ To support his thesis that this intolerance was not purely cultural or "ethnocentric," Bartlett describes legislation in parts of eastern Europe in the fourteenth century that made German descent a requirement for holding office or belonging to a guild and banned intermarriage between Germans and Slavs. In Anglo-Irish cities, at about the same time, guild membership was being denied to those of "Irish blood or birth," and "there were to be no marriages between those of immigrant and native stock."¹⁶

What was missing—and why I think such ethnic discrimination should not be labeled racist—was an ideology or worldview that would persuasively justify such practices. Bartlett's account suggests that these ethnic exclusions were usually the self-interested actions of conquering families and lineages and were likely to be condemned by church authorities as a violation of the principles governing the rights and privileges of Christian fellowship. Where a conquered population had not been converted to Christianity, as in the case of the Muslims of Castille in the fifteenth century, discrimination on religious grounds could be justified. But where the natives had embraced Catholicism, unequal treatment is best regarded as an illicit form of group nepotism, lacking the full legitimacy that a racial order would seem to require. The notion that Jews in particular were malevolent beings in league with the Devil provided such an ideology and gave antisemitism an intensity and

durability that prejudice against the peripheral Europeans would never quite attain. Suspicions that recent Slavic or Scandinavian converts had not fully internalized the true faith, and might even remain secret pagans, may well have been justified in some cases. But unless—or until—it was presumed that such infidelity was organic and carried in the blood, it would not be proper to describe such an attitude as racist.

It remains true, however, that medieval Europe was a “persecuting society,” increasingly intolerant, not only of Jews, but also of lepers and anyone whose beliefs or behavior smacked of heresy or deviance at a time when religious and moral conformity were being demanded more insistently than ever before.¹⁷ It stands to reason that such a drive for uniformity and homogeneity would engender resistance to cultural pluralism and provide fertile soil for ethnic intolerance. Encouraging and exacerbating this heterophobia were the tensions and anxieties resulting from momentous social, economic, and political changes. The gradual consolidation of countries such as England, France, and Spain into relatively large dynastic states with definite borders and a single predominant language was beginning to threaten local autonomy, and an acceleration of urbanization and commercialization were bringing people of diverse culture and appearance into fractious contact and creating conflicts between feudal lords and an emerging bourgeoisie. But in the fourteenth century the incredible catastrophe of the Black Death inspired an especially urgent hunt for scapegoats. As we have seen, the demonization of the Jews in the popular Christian mind was brought to fru-

ition by the widely believed allegation that they had poisoned the wells as part of a diabolical plot to exterminate the followers of Christ.

If racial antisemitism had medieval antecedents in the popular tendency to see Jews as agents of the Devil and thus, for all practical purposes, beyond redemption and outside the circle of potential Christian fellowship, the other principal form of modern racism—the color-coded, white-over-black variety—did not have significant medieval roots and was mainly a product of the modern period. In fact there was a definite tendency toward Negrophilia in parts of northern and western Europe in the late Middle Ages, and the common presumption that dark pigmentation inspired instant revulsion on the part of light-skinned Europeans is, if not completely false, at least highly misleading.

Before the middle of the fifteenth century, Europeans had little or no direct contact with sub-Saharan Africans. Artistic and literary representations of these distant and exotic peoples ranged from the monstrous and horrifying to the saintly and heroic. On the one hand, devils were sometimes pictured as having dark skins and what may appear to be African features, and the executioners of martyrs were often portrayed as black men. The symbolic association of blackness with evil and death and whiteness with goodness and purity unquestionably had some effect in predisposing light-skinned people against those with darker pigmentation.¹⁸ But the significance of this cultural proclivity can be exaggerated. If black *always* had unfavorable connotations, why did many orders of priests and nuns wear black instead of white or some other color?

In conflict with this tendency toward the fear or disparagement of black people was the medieval iconography associated with what the French cultural historian Henri Baudet has called “*le bon Nègre*.”¹⁹ Building on scriptural evidence that the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity was an Ethiopian eunuch, exponents of spreading the gospel honored black converts as living evidence of the universality of their faith. There was an unmistakable recognition of Otherness in this tradition; it seemed to say that *even those* who are as alien and different from us as black Africans can be brothers and sisters in Christ.²⁰ But in the late Middle Ages, in the period between the latter Crusades and the Portuguese encounter with West Africa in the mid-fifteenth century, a favorable, sometimes glorified, image of blacks seems to have become ascendant in the western European mind. At roughly the same time that Jews were being demonized, blacks—or at least some blacks—were being sanctified.

A central element in late medieval Negrophilia was the myth of Prester John, a non-European Christian monarch, first identified with India, then with the Tartars, and ultimately with the actual Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. Prester John’s prescribed role was to join Western Christians in the struggle against Islam, which by the time that the association with black Africa was clearly established in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries had come to mean primarily the Turkish expansion into the Mediterranean and southeastern Europe. Hopes for an alliance with Ethiopia and Prester John suffered a setback in 1442 when representatives of the Ethiopian Coptic Church refused to

bow to the authority of the pope at an ecumenical conference in Florence.²¹ When the Portuguese actually reached Ethiopia by sea from the Indian Ocean in the early sixteenth century, they were unimpressed with what they found, and the Ethiopians were gradually relegated to the fringes of the European imagination.

But while it lasted, the cult of Prester John and Ethiopia was only one of several signs that blacks could be represented in a positive and dignified manner in the late Middle Ages. Another was the practice that developed of representing one of the Magi in Nativity scenes as black or African. (Caspar or Gaspar, as he was called, was held by some to be the ancestor of Prester John.) Equally remarkable was the cult of the originally white Saint Maurice, who quite suddenly turned black—at least in the Germanic lands, where the association of Africa with Christian virtues was most strongly developed. Other blacks often presented in saintly or heroic postures were Saint Gregory the Moor and Parzifal's mulatto half brother Feirefiz.²²

The representation of the African as Christian saint or hero was admittedly a relatively superficial cultural phenomenon. It provided no warrant for expecting that Europeans would be greatly influenced by it when they came into sustained contact with Africans under conditions that encouraged other attitudes. It does, however, weaken the argument that Europeans were strongly prejudiced against blacks before the beginning of the slave trade and that color-coded racism preceded enslavement. The one place where one can perhaps find an anticipation of antiblack racism in the late Middle Ages is in fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century Iberia. Here the association of blackness with slavery was

apparently already being made. According to historian James H. Sweet, it was during the period when Christians and Muslims coexisted in Iberia that the former learned from the latter to identify blackness with servitude.²³

Historians Bernard Lewis and William McKee Evans have presented much evidence to support the view that the Islamic world preceded the Christian in representing sub-Saharan Africans as descendants of Ham, who were cursed and condemned to perpetual bondage because of their ancestor's mistreatment of his father, Noah, as described in an obscure passage in Genesis.²⁴ Although medieval Arabs and Moors had white slaves as well as black and thus did not practice the purely racial slavery that Europeans carried to the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they generally assigned blacks the most menial and degrading tasks. In southern Iberia the most conspicuous slaves of light-skinned or tawny Moorish masters were black Africans, and it was natural for Christians, as well as Muslims, to begin to associate sub-Saharan African ancestry with lifetime servitude. When Portuguese navigators acquired slaves of their own as a result of their voyages along the Guinea Coast in the mid- to late fifteenth century and offered them for sale in the port cities of Christian Iberia, the identification of black skins with servile status was complete. Hence even before the discovery of America, some Iberian Christians were more likely to conceive of blacks as destined by God to be "hewers of wood and carriers of water" than to view them as exemplars of the Christian virtues.²⁵

The fact that Europeans were ceasing to enslave other Europeans at the time when African slaves became sud-

denly and readily available was at the root of white supremacist attitudes and policies; although, for reasons that remain to be explored, it took a considerable time for antiblack racism to crystallize into a fully elaborated ideology. Once maritime contacts were established with West Africa, the acquisition of slaves was relatively easy. Slavery and trading in slaves were well developed in West Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese. As John Thornton has shown, productive and remunerative economic activity in precolonial Africa depended heavily on slavery. Property in land was not recognized in custom or law, but the ownership of people's labor was. Slavery in Africa may have been very different in practice from what developed on the plantations of the New World, but the principle that human beings could be owned as instruments of production was well established. Consequently Europeans did not generally have to capture their own slaves; African rulers and slave merchants were happy to do it for them.²⁶

The practice of holding whites as slaves had been in gradual decline in Europe since the early Middle Ages, when the custom of ransoming or exchanging prisoners of war began to replace the practice of enslavement. Furthermore, it had come to seem wrong to enslave other Christians, although heathens remained fair game. Africans were not only available for purchase, but they were non-Christians. Hence the temptation to acquire them and to treat them as unfree was a powerful one. It could even be rationalized as a missionary project: their souls might be saved through contact with believers. Initially skin color probably had relatively little to do with it, except as a means of identification or possibly as an indication of radical Otherness

that made it psychologically easier to treat them with the brutality that the slave trade often necessitated.²⁷ The conversions of the last pagan Slavs of eastern Europe and Russia meant that there were virtually no European populations available for enslavement under the religious sanction. If there had been, would they have toiled alongside Africans on New World plantations? Quite possibly, but of course it is impossible to prove a counterfactual. What seems clear, however, is that the initial purchase and transport of African slaves by Europeans could easily be justified in terms of religious and legal status without recourse to an explicit racism.

Closer to modern racism, arguably its first real anticipation, was the treatment of Jewish converts to Christianity in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain. *Conversos* were identified and discriminated against because of the belief held by some Christians that the impurity of their blood made them incapable of experiencing a true conversion. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Spain was, by medieval standards, a tolerant plural society in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews coexisted in relative harmony under Christian monarchs who accorded a substantial degree of self-government to each religious community.²⁸ But in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries an intensification of the conflict with the Moors heightened religious zeal and engendered an increase in discrimination against Muslims and Jews. For Jews the growing intolerance turned violent in 1391, when a wave of pogroms swept through the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon. As in earlier pogroms in northern Europe, Jews were given the choice of conversion or death, but unlike the Jews of the Rhineland at the

time of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, a large proportion of the persecuted Spanish Jews chose to convert rather than become martyrs to their faith.²⁹

In 1412, discriminatory legislation created another mass of converts. Finally, when Jews as such were expelled from Spain in 1492, many chose baptism as an alternative to expatriation. Consequently Spain's population in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries included a group unique in Europe composed of hundreds of thousands, possibly about half a million formerly Jewish "New Christians" or *conversos*. The sheer numbers of converts made traditional forms of assimilation more difficult. Rather than absorption of small numbers of individuals or families into Christian society, it was now a question of the incorporation of what amounted to a substantial ethnic group that, despite its change of religious affiliation, retained elements of cultural distinctiveness.³⁰

Historians of Jews and Judaism disagree on the extent to which these conversions created believing Christians or secret Jews. There is no doubt, however, that the Inquisition proceeded from the assumption that Jewish ancestry per se justified the suspicion of covert "judaizing." Both doctrinal heresy and enmity toward Christians came to be seen as the likely, even inevitable, consequence of having Jewish "blood."³¹ The dominant view of recent historians is that, after the first generation at least, most of those with Jewish ancestry who remained in Spain became believing Catholics. In many cases, intermarriage with Christians diminished the salience of Jewish descent. Yet under the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), they could still become victims of a form of discrimination that appears to

have been more racial than religious. In 1449, a rebellion in Toledo resulted in violence against the *conversos* who were in the royal service, and their exclusion from public office in the city. In the century that followed, a number of institutions and local governments enacted blood purity laws, and in 1547 the archbishop of Toledo applied this exclusionary principle to all the church bodies under his jurisdiction. Soon certificates of pure blood were required for admission into many ecclesiastical or secular organizations and orders. It is also highly significant that from the very beginning of the settlement of the Americas, only those thought to be of pure Christian ancestry were permitted to join the ranks of the *conquistadores* and missionaries.³²

To the extent that it was enforced, the Spanish doctrine of purity of blood was undoubtedly racist. It represented the stigmatization of an entire ethnic group on the basis of deficiencies that allegedly could not be eradicated by conversion or assimilation. Inherited social status was nothing new; the concept of “noble blood” had long meant that the offspring of certain families were born with a claim to high status. But when the status of large numbers of people was depressed purely and simply because of their derivation from a denigrated *ethnos*, a line had been crossed that gave “race” a new and more comprehensive significance. According to Léon Poliakov, the French historian of antisemitism, the Spanish attitude toward the *conversos* that developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries implied that “Jews were evil by nature and not only because of their beliefs.” Thus, he contends, “sectarian hatred” became “racial hatred.”³³ But B. Netanyahu’s claim that *limpieza de sangre* anticipated the Nazi attitude toward the Jews overstates

the case. In the first place, the doctrine was applied unevenly and enforcement was irregular. Many offices and opportunities remained open to those with Jewish ancestry. The nobility itself was never purged of those with New Christian antecedents. When certificates of pure blood were required, they could sometimes be purchased, just as in the Spanish colonies in the Americas, with their system of *castas* based on color, certificates of whiteness could be bought by those of Spanish culture but of part-Indian ancestry who could afford to pay the bribe. Nevertheless, until the nineteenth century it was a definite disadvantage and a possible cause of discrimination to be of part-Jewish ancestry in Spain. It was a skeleton in the family closet that could be rattled by one's rivals or enemies.³⁴

The fate of the *Moriscos*—those Muslims who were forced to accept Christianity after the completion of the *Reconquista* in 1492—was in some respects worse than that of the *conversos*. An assault on all aspects of Moorish culture followed the proscription of the Muslim religion and provoked a rebellion in 1568, which was brutally suppressed. In 1609–1614, the entire *Morisco* population, numbering perhaps a third of a million, was driven out of the country, never to return. But it is more difficult than in the case of the *conversos* to distinguish between racism and ethnocentrism or “culturalism.” More than the Jewish converts and their descendants, the formerly Muslim new Christians lived in separate communities and adhered as much as possible to their traditional culture, including their religion. Ex-Jews tended to be city dwellers, and many belonged to the middle or professional classes. A substantial proportion of them retained a pride in their Jewish ancestry and contin-

ued to follow some Jewish customs, like refraining from the eating of pork. An indeterminate number, after going to Mass, secretly worshiped the Jehovah of the Old Testament at home. But it was to their advantage to conform at least outwardly to what was expected of them as Christian converts. The *Moriscos*, on the other hand, were mostly peasants and artisans who lived in their own villages or quarters. Because many of them resisted even the appearance of assimilation, it would be easier to characterize the feeling against them as based more on cultural than on racial difference. But it remains true that *limpieza de sangre* proscribed Moorish as well as Jewish ancestry, and that to be truly Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one had to claim to be of pure Christian descent.³⁵

At the time that Spanish society was being purged of Jews, Moors, and many of their genuinely or nominally converted descendants, Spain was colonizing the New World and encountering another kind of difference. Unlike the Jews and the Moors, adherents to the great religions that challenged Christianity in the Old World, the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas represented either primal innocence or subhumanity. In the great debate that ensued on which was the case, two traditions of thought about difference influenced European—and, more specifically, Spanish—thinking about the Indians of the New World. One was the medieval belief that “monstrous races” or subhuman “wild men” inhabited the fringes of the known world. Some early explorers brought back tales suggesting that the Indians were such creatures.³⁶ The other relevant tradition or precedent, at least for the Spanish, was the conquest and colonization of the Canary Islands. The native

Canarians, thought now to have been of pre-Islamic North African or Berber stock, were at first regarded as “wild men” and enslaved. But the church protested that reducing such “innocent” pagans to servitude hindered their conversion, and the surviving indigenes were eventually freed, converted, and successfully assimilated through intermarriage into the Spanish settler population.³⁷

It is significant that when Columbus recorded his first encounter with Native Americans, he described them as being similar in color to the Canary Islanders. He also manifested the bifurcated image that would characterize European perceptions of Indians for centuries to come. Those Indians who greeted him with apparent friendliness were viewed as simple children of nature who would be receptive to tutelage in civilization and Christianity. But the hostile Indians from islands other than the ones on which Columbus first landed were written off as “cannibals” who must be subdued by force or exterminated. Thus was born the dichotomy of the Indian as either a noble savage who could be civilized or a wild beast who could at best be tamed and at worst should be exterminated.³⁸

The great debate between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas that took place in Valladolid in 1550 might be viewed as a dispute over which of Columbus’s initial impressions was the more accurate and generalizable. The critical question was whether Indians possessed reason, which was taken as the essential indicator of whether they should be accorded full human status. Sepúlveda, applying Aristotle’s conception of “natural slavery” to all native Americans, argued in effect that Indians were nonrational beings who could be made useful to the

Spaniards and amenable to Christianity only by the application of force—in other words, by being enslaved. They were, he said in a classic statement of sixteenth-century racism, “barbarous and inhuman peoples abhorring all civil life, customs and virtue.”³⁹ Las Casas, who had personally observed the suffering and high mortality that had resulted from Indian forced labor in the Antilles, contended that Indians possessed reason and a capacity for civil life. They therefore could be converted to Christianity and made useful subjects of the Spanish crown through peaceful persuasion. Las Casas operated on the general principle that “[a]ll the races of the world are men, and the definition of all men, and of each of them, is only one, and that is reason.”⁴⁰ He did not, however, object to the importation of enslaved Africans to do the work on the plantations and in the mines that was proving so lethal to the Indians.⁴¹

Las Casas spoke for what became official Spanish policy because his views were in conformity with those of the Catholic Church and the Spanish monarchy. Sepúlveda ignored the crucial distinction between pagans who had never heard the word of Christ, and infidels, like Jews and Muslims, who had been exposed to the gospel and had rejected it. The former, like the Canary Islanders and the American Indians, could be brought to Christ through an appeal to their innate rational faculties. Even if, as was commonly believed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, American Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel, they were not burdened with the hereditary guilt of Old World Jews; for they had been “lost” before the coming of Christ and thus had not rejected him or been implicated in the Crucifixion. Only the infidels—Jews and Muslims—

had to be subjugated by force because of the evil in their hearts. But what then was the justification for enslaving Africans who were also pagans rather than infidels? The Spanish authorization of black slavery proceeded primarily from the differing legal status of conquered peoples and those obtained as merchandise from areas outside of Spanish jurisdiction.⁴²

More averse to making slaves than to buying them, Spain and subsequent European colonizers either discouraged enslavement of indigenous peoples, as did the Dutch and the French (who saw it as an obstacle to trade as well as an unseemly business), or phased it out in a relatively short time, as did the English in North America. Often permitted, however, were forms of forced labor that did not constitute slavery in the strict sense but came close to it, such as the Spanish system of *encomienda*—the granting to a Spaniard of the right to conscript the labor of an Indian community—and the Dutch misapplication of the legal status of “apprenticeship” to force the Khoikhoi or “Hottentots” of the Cape of Good Hope into pastoral serfdom during the eighteenth century.

If religion rather than race justified African slavery in the beginning, how can we account for the apparent reluctance of Europeans to enslave pagan populations within areas that they were in the process of colonizing? In the first place, as the Spanish case makes especially clear, enslavability depended, at least in theory, on its relationship to the missionary enterprise. The only way to save West African souls, it was argued, was to enslave them, but this was not true of conquered indigenes. However, awareness of the West African’s unusually dark pigmentation (even when

compared with that of the Khoikhoi of southern Africa, who were usually described as being yellow or tan) soon became part of the equation. Before the discovery of America, it was commonly believed that what struck Europeans as the African's extraordinary color was the direct effect of a tropical or equatorial environment. But when it became clear that the natives of Brazil who lived in a climate similar to that of West Africa had tawny rather than black skins, questions were raised about the origins of African pigmentation. These sometimes led to speculation that the blackness of Africans was permanent, either from some physiological cause or as a result of the biblical Curse of Ham or Canaan. Those Europeans who wondered why blacks, alone of the "innocent" pagans encountered in the course of Europe's expansion, could be held in slavery without qualms (and who were not taken in by missionary rationale) were tempted to see blackness as a curse signifying that Africans were designated by God himself to be a race of slaves.⁴³

It is paradoxical to find that Spain and Portugal were in the forefront of European racism or protoracism in their discrimination against converted Jews and Muslims, but that the Iberian colonies manifested a greater acceptance of intermarriage and more fluidity of racial categories and identities than the colonies of other European nations. The failure of Spanish and Portuguese women to emigrate to the New World in substantial numbers was of course a major precondition for the intermixture that took place. Indians were brutally exploited by the possessors of *encomienda* and the proprietors of silver mines and haciendas, but the purity-of-blood doctrine was never systematically ap-

plied to those with part-Indian or even African ancestry. An attempt to order society on the basis of *castas* defined in terms of color and ethnicity eventually broke down because the extent and variety of *mestizaje* (interracial marriage and concubinage) created such an abundance of types that the system collapsed into the three basic categories of white, *mestizo*, and Indian. Those categories lacked the rigidity of true racial divisions, because aspirants to higher status who possessed certain cultural and economic qualifications could often transcend them.⁴⁴

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain is critical to the history of Western racism because its attitudes and practices served as a kind of segue between the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the naturalistic racism of the modern era. The idiom remained religious, and what was inherited through the “blood” was a propensity to heresy or unbelief rather than intellectual or emotional inferiority. Innocent “savages” who embraced Spanish civilization and Catholicism did not carry impure blood. Discrimination against Indians persisted after they were baptized, but it was based on culture more than ancestry. *Mestizos* who had adopted Spanish ways could be admitted to religious orders that excluded Jewish *conversos*. The problem that was created for the Spanish by Jews and Moors was that their conversion (especially if forced, as it normally was) did not necessarily induce them to sacrifice their ethnic identity or pride in their ancestry. Such ethnic difference, even if accompanied by a sincere profession of Christian faith, became intolerable in peninsular Spain, if not to the same extent in the colonies, at a time when a strong national identity was being formed. As *Hispanidad* was

being constructed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, *limpieza de sangre* was a way of excluding those who did not meet the requirements for a new and more exacting conception of what it meant to be Spanish. The context was the *Reconquista*, a heightened emphasis on Spain as the champion of the True Church, and the growth of an empire that would serve as an arena to demonstrate Spanish heroism and piety.⁴⁵

One might be tempted to draw a parallel with the relation of German national identity to racial antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but such an analogy should not be pressed too far. One factor that makes the Iberian case different is the role that religion played. National identity and a universalistic religious commitment were made synonymous, and national unfitness was defined as an inherited inability to believe in the One True Faith as defined by the Inquisition. What we have here, therefore, is a quasi-racialized religious nationalism and not a fully racialized secular nationalism of the kind that arose in Germany. (It would take the Enlightenment and reactions against it to make this possible.) The more benevolent official attitude that the Spanish adopted in regard to the Indians was consistent with a belief that Jewish or Muslim infidelity did not taint the blood of the American natives.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Indians and *Mestizos* were not purely Spanish, and the attitude of Las Casas and the church did not prevent *conquistadores* and colonists from treating them on many occasions as if they were subhuman. Although it was a propagandistic exaggeration, the “black legend” of Spanish cruelty toward the Indians propagated by the English had more than a grain of truth in it. One way to un-

derstand the gap between religious doctrine and social practice is to explore the effect of *limpieza de sangre* on ordinary Spaniards who could claim pure Christian descent. In Spain itself, travelers were astounded to find peasants and artisans claiming to be of noble blood because they had no Jewish or Moorish ancestry. Sancho Panzo in *Don Quixote* declared himself to be “of good birth and at least an old Christian.” It was in Spain that a widely shared pride in origin first became the basis for a kind of *Herrenvolk* egalitarianism.⁴⁷ This “*caballero* complex” was carried to America in slightly modified form, where it survived into the early nineteenth century. “In Spain it is a kind of title of nobility not to descend from Jews or Moors,” wrote Alexander von Humboldt. “In America, the skin, more or less white, is what dictates the class that an individual occupies in society. A white, even if he rides barefoot on horseback, considers himself to be a member of the nobility of the country.”⁴⁸

The growth of a religious racism or a racialized religiosity can also be found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century views of Africans. As was suggested previously, a purely religious difference could justify slavery. It could not, however, readily legitimize the retention of blacks in slavery after they had been baptized. The presumption of “Christian freedom” was of particular importance to Protestants, because membership in a Protestant church created a sense of religious status that was normally higher and more demanding than permission to attend Mass in a Catholic parish.⁴⁹ In 1618 the Dutch Calvinist Synod of Dort forbade the sale of Christian slaves and declared that they “ought to enjoy equal right of liberty with other Christians.” But, despite this language, it did not actually require

their manumission.⁵⁰ In the slave colonies established by the Dutch and English in the seventeenth century, relatively little mission work was carried out among the slaves because of the masters' expectation that baptism would give them a claim to freedom.

One possible rationale for holding Africans in servitude regardless of their religious status was the myth of the Curse of Ham or Canaan based on a mysterious passage in the book of Genesis. Ham drew the wrath of God because he viewed his father, Noah, in a naked and apparently inebriated state and mocked him. For this transgression, his son Canaan and all Canaan's descendants were condemned to be "servants unto servants." The value of this legend to the ancient Hebrews was that it justified their conquest and subjugation of the Canaanites. But among medieval Arabs importing slaves from East Africa to the Middle East, the emphasis shifted from Canaan to Ham, widely believed to be the ancestor of all Africans, and the physical result of the curse became a blackening of the skin.⁵¹ Medieval Europeans had very confused conceptions of who the accursed really were. Notions of geography before the fifteenth century were so uncertain that a clear sense of distinct continents to which racial types could be assigned was lacking. The curse was variously applied, sometimes to people who would later be considered Asians, like the Tartars or the inhabitants of India. It was also used during the medieval period to explain why some Europeans were the hereditary slaves or serfs of other Europeans.⁵² Only in the mid-fifteenth century, with the Portuguese explorations of West Africa, was serious attention drawn to the possibility that the curse explained black slavery. The earliest description

of the Portuguese discovery of Guinea referred to a biblical curse but confused Ham with Cain.⁵³

The first known invocation of the curse in English writing was in George Best's 1578 account of Martin Frobisher's voyage in search of the Northwest Passage. As Benjamin Braude has revealed, Best felt impelled, as a promoter of far-flung imperialist adventures, to refute climatic or environmental theories of physical differentiation among human beings. He worried about the tendency of such theories to discourage English or European expansion into the torrid or frigid parts of the earth. Would Europeans freeze, turn black, or become antipodal monsters if they wandered too far from home? Not, Best replied, if racial type was immune to the effects of the physical environment—if, in other words, racial identities were fixed for all time by divine decree, as in the understanding of the Curse of Ham that consigned blacks to perpetual slavery.⁵⁴

Between the sixteenth century and the nineteenth, slave traders and those who purchased their merchandise referred frequently, if casually and inconsistently, to the curse as an explanation of why all their slaves happened to be black or African. For many of them, the curse may have helped rationalize holding black Christians in bondage. It undoubtedly helped to inhibit condemnations of black slavery as contrary to Holy Writ. But why was it that baptism did not lift the curse? Jews had also been cursed—for their alleged role in the Crucifixion—but it remained the official view of the Catholic Church that conversion meant the remission of this ancestral sin—although, as we have seen, many ordinary European Catholics believed that the curse had entered the blood. (Spanish bishops condoned discrimi-

nation against *conversos*, but only on the assumption that many New Christians were really secret Jews and thus not true converts. They never denied that an authentic Jewish conversion was possible, if unlikely.) To a considerable extent, the irreversible Curse of Ham, like the literal demonization of the Jews, operated on the level of popular belief and mythology rather than as formal ideology. In fact it was refuted by learned authorities, who merely had to note that the curse fell on Canaan specifically and not on his brother Cush, who, according to the standard biblical exegesis of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was the actual progenitor of the African race. Justifications of black servitude as a divinely ordained punishment for the descendants of Ham or Canaan were rare or inconspicuous in the treatises and pamphlets concerning slavery that appeared before the nineteenth century. Some proslavery polemicists in the antebellum United States (those who rejected scientific racism on religious grounds) were the first to make sustained and elaborate use of the Hamitic legend to show that racial slavery was divinely sanctioned.⁵⁵

The lack of a serious attack on slavery before the mid-eighteenth century made a fully developed ideological defense unnecessary, but it did not prevent the growth of popular attitudes and beliefs that stigmatized black people as servile and inferior. In late-seventeenth-century Virginia a series of laws made it clear that conversion did not entail freedom. This legislation had the effect of changing the rationale for slavery from heathenism to heathen ancestry and thus served an implicitly racist function similar to that of *limpieza de sangre*. To the extent that Protestants believed, as many did by the mid- to late seventeenth century, that

a person of faith should be the slave of no one but God himself, the chattel servitude of a genuine believer could be troubling. To maintain that the state of the soul had no necessary effect on earthly status was an ancient Christian doctrine, but it was losing its force in the face of the Puritan revolution and the rise of radical Protestant sects such as the Quakers and the Anabaptists. In this more egalitarian climate of religious opinion, making a heathen background the legal basis for slavery was another way of asserting innate difference and thus resisting the homogenizing effect of baptism. As in the case of antisemitism a conflation of religion and race in the popular mind would prepare the ground for the more explicit and autonomous racism that would emerge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁶

One can therefore trace the origins of the two main forms of modern racism—the color-coded white supremacist variety and the essentialist version of antisemitism—to the late medieval and early modern periods. Since the idiom of this period was primarily religious rather than naturalistic or scientific, it could only be through some special act of God that some peoples could have been consigned to pariah status or slavery. But any such invocation of what might be called supernaturalist racism came into conflict with the main thrust of Christianity—the salvation of the entire human race, which, according to the New Testament, was of “one blood.” It was because he argued from this perspective that Las Casas was more persuasive than Sepúlveda. On a popular level the great curses served to make it easier for Christians to treat other human beings as less than human. Europeans might seek to affirm their status and self-worth through the allegation that the blood

in their veins was superior to that of people descended from Jews, or because the color of their skin made them the natural masters of Africans. And they could find passages of the Bible that seemed to confirm their prejudices. But to achieve its full potential as an ideology, racism had to be emancipated from Christian universalism. To become the ideological basis of a social order, it also had to be clearly disassociated from traditionalist conceptions of social hierarchy. In a society in which inequality based on birth was the norm for everyone from king down to peasant, ethnic slavery and ghettoization were special cases of a general pattern—very special in some ways—but still not radical exceptions to the hierarchical premise. Paradoxical as it may seem, the rejection of hierarchy as the governing principle of social and political organization, and its replacement by the aspiration for equality *in this world* as well as in the eyes of God, had to occur before racism could come to full flower.