

# Medieval European Antisemitism and Connections to Intolerance in America

## Overview

In this lesson, students will reflect on a quote about intolerance, read and respond to a secondary source document, demonstrate their understanding through an artistic activity, and discuss the lesson's relevance to contemporary American society.

This resource includes:

- 1) A lesson plan
- 2) A student handout (answers are included in the lesson plan)

## Goals

- 1) Students will be able to explain how antisemitism impacted Jews in medieval Europe.
- 2) Students will be able to apply understandings about scapegoating from the material on medieval antisemitism to their understanding of prejudice towards minorities in America.

## Materials

Each student will need:

- 1) *Antisemitism in Medieval Europe Student Handout*
- 2) Access to markers or colored pencils

## Instructional Design

### Anticipatory Set (5-10 minutes)

- 1) On the board write:  
"That the desires of the majority of the people are often for injustice and inhumanity against the minority, is demonstrated by every page of the history of the whole world."  
*John Adams*
- 2) Read the quote and tell students that it was written by the 2<sup>nd</sup> American president.
- 3) Ask students to put the quote into their own words and to explain why it is important to study times when minorities have suffered (*Answers might include: To understand other cultures, one needs to understand what they have experienced. Studying how minorities have suffered in the past can help us understand intolerance today and find ways to prevent it*). This can be done orally as a whole-class activity or as an individual writing activity. If done as an individual assignment, have volunteers share their answers.

### Activity 1 (20-25 minutes)

- 1) Ask students to identify majority and minority religious groups in medieval European society.



2) Point out that, unlike America, which has many ethnic and religious minorities, most places in medieval Europe were not very diverse.

3) In mixed ability pairs, have students read *Antisemitism in Medieval Europe* and answer the reading questions. Alternatively, the information could be presented by lecture and the questions could be answered orally in class discussions. If a lecture format is chosen, an additional source of information is the ICS resource *Jews in Medieval History: A Teacher's Guide*.

4) Have the class discuss their answers. The questions are listed below; possible answers are in *italics*:

a. In your own words, explain the difference between prejudice and discrimination. How can prejudice lead to discrimination or persecution?

*Prejudice has to do with ideas and feelings while discrimination has to do with actions. Prejudice can lead to discrimination or persecution because people decide what to do based on their ideas and feelings. If people don't like a particular group, they might think it is OK to treat them badly.*

b. How was medieval antisemitism different from the antisemitism in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany?

*Medieval antisemitism treated the Jews as a religious group; 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century German antisemitism treated the Jews as a racial group*

c. How are medieval European ghettos similar to modern American ghettos? How are they different?

*Like medieval ghettos, American ghettos are areas of cities that are associated with minorities and poverty. People lived in medieval ghettos because of the law; people live in American ghettos for economic reasons and because of discrimination in housing, lending, and other areas of society.*

d. Why do you think Jews were scapegoated?

*Answers will vary but may mention that people like to blame others for misfortunes, Jews were seen as outsiders—different from the majority, or it is easy to blame people you don't know.*

e. Identify at least three groups that face prejudice or discrimination today. Try to include groups that are not based on race or religion. Have you seen anyone experience discrimination? When?

*People with disabilities, gays and lesbians, people from different countries, people who have particular political beliefs, ethnic or racial groups, and religious groups.*



## Activity 2 (15-20 minutes)

- 1) Assign students one of the following three activities or allow them to choose (there is one visual arts activity, one dramatic arts activity, and one literary arts activity).

### **Visual Arts**

Students design a memorial for the victims of medieval antisemitism who were killed during the crusades or other acts of violence. The memorial should include a plaque with at least two sentences.

### **Dramatic Arts**

Students create a skit in which a Spanish Jewish family in 1492 discusses what they should do. They have been told they must convert, leave the country, or die. Their religion and culture is very important to them, but they love their home and are worried about how they will survive if they leave their jobs, their possessions, and the country where they have lived their entire life.

### **Literary Arts**

Students write a poem on the theme of intolerance or hatred. The poem must include at least one fact about medieval antisemitism.

## Closure (5-10 minutes)

- 1) Review the definition of *scapegoat* from the reading (unfairly blame for problems or tragedies). Remind students that Jews were often scapegoated in medieval Europe.
- 2) Ask students which minority groups in America are scapegoated.

*Answers might include: African-Americans and Latino communities are blamed for crime. Immigrants are blamed for lack of jobs or low wages. Jews are blamed for bank problems. American Arabs and American Muslims are blamed for terrorism. The gay and lesbian community is blamed for weakening families and marriage.*

- 3) Ask students what medieval antisemitism can teach us about blaming American minorities for problems and tragedies.

*Answers might include: Minorities are often blamed because they are not well understood or because they are seen as outsiders. Minorities are easy to blame, even if they have nothing to do with the problem or tragedy. Beliefs and ideas can lead to discrimination and persecution.*

- 4) How can Americans today fight prejudice and discrimination?

*Answers might include: Speaking out when they hear prejudiced language or see discrimination, supporting antidiscrimination laws and policies, writing letters to the editor in newspapers to talk about problems, encouraging others to be open-minded, watching their own language for stereotypes, being knowledgeable about other cultures, and sharing their culture and traditions with others.*

- 5) Teachers may supplement this discussion with lessons on tolerance from other organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Institute ([http://www.adl.org/education/edu\\_awod/](http://www.adl.org/education/edu_awod/)) or the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp>).



## Antisemitism in Medieval Europe

*Antisemitism* is prejudice toward, discrimination against, or persecution of Jews.

*Prejudice* is the suspicion or hatred of a particular group, such as a race or religion.

*Discrimination* is the unfair treatment of people because of they belong to a particular group.

*Persecution* is intentionally making someone suffer.

The word antisemitism was first used in Germany in the late 1800s to refer to the false idea that Jews were a race that was physically and morally inferior to other races. Today, the word is used to refer to all hatred against Jews and Judaism, before and after the late 1800s.

*In your own words, explain the difference between prejudice and discrimination. How can prejudice lead to discrimination or persecution?*

In medieval Europe, antisemitism was more closely connected to religion than to race. It was hard for many medieval Christians to understand why Jews did not believe in the divinity of Jesus like they did, especially because Jesus was born and raised as a Jew. Some argued that the best explanation was that Jews worked for the Devil. Also, many Christians believed that Jews in their country were guilty for killing Jesus even though he was crucified by Romans hundreds of years earlier. Finally, even though there were many different kingdoms in medieval Europe, people believed they were all part of Christendom – a civilization defined by belief in Christianity and obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, many people saw Jews as outsiders who did not belong in their country. It is important to note that the Church and most Christians today reject these beliefs and teach that tolerance of others is an important virtue.

*How was medieval antisemitism different from the antisemitism in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany?*



Antisemitic beliefs caused many restrictions to be placed on Jews. For example, Jews were often prohibited from owning land and were only allowed to work in certain professions. Because lending money was one of the few professions open to Jews, a new antisemitic belief that Jews were greedier than other people emerged. Some people today still believe this myth. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Church issued a decree that Jews had to wear special clothes so they could be easily identified. In some places, Jews were not allowed to live with Christians. Instead, they had to live in special areas of the city called ghettos. These ghettos were often overcrowded, impoverished, and had walls with gates that were locked at night and during Christian holidays. When the gates were locked, Jews were not allowed outside of the ghetto.

*How are medieval European ghettos similar to modern American ghettos? How are they different?*

In addition to legal restrictions, antisemitic beliefs also caused great violence against the Jews. During the crusades many Jewish communities were destroyed and many Jews were killed. Originally, the crusades were a series of military expeditions to the Eastern Mediterranean because Europeans believed that God wanted them to conquer the “Holy Land” where Jesus had lived. Muslim armies had captured this area from Christian rulers centuries earlier. Some crusaders believed that God wanted them to kill all non-Christians, so they attacked European Jews. Scholars estimate that between one-quarter and one-third of the Jews in northern France and Germany were killed during the First Crusade. It is important to note that even though Church teachings helped fuel these massacres, the Church spoke out against these attacks and many bishops tried to protect Jews in their communities.

Jews also faced violence because they were often scapegoated, or unfairly blamed, for tragedies and natural disasters. For example, many people falsely blamed Jews for the Bubonic Plague which killed millions of people. If a child disappeared, Jews were sometimes accused of murdering the child. These false accusations often led to attacks on Jewish communities.

*Why do you think Jews were scapegoated?*

Jews were expelled, or forced to leave, many European countries. When they were forced to leave, the king often took Jewish property. Greed played a role in the expulsions, and antisemitism made the Jews easy targets. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Jews were expelled at least 34 times from



major Christian cities and states. The most famous example of these expulsions was in 1492 when Jews in Spain were given the choice of converting to Christianity, leaving the country, or being killed.

The Jewish experience with antisemitism has influenced Jewish culture. For example, fighting intolerance is an important Jewish value in part because Jews have been victims of intolerance. Prejudice and discrimination continue to be problems today. By speaking out against intolerance, people of any age can help create a better society.

*Identify at least three groups that face prejudice or discrimination today. Try to identify groups that are not based on race or religion. Have you seen anyone experience discrimination? When?*

