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Response to David M. Freidenreich, "How Could Their Food Not Be Impure?"

Scholars of Christian depictions of Jews and Judaism have long recognized that Christian sources, beginning with some of the earliest texts of the New Testament, often make "Jewish" the negative pole of all they consider ought to be "Christian." Jews were enslaved to the law while Christians were free; whereas Jews clung to the flesh and the letter, Christians embraced the spirit. The content of that negative pole could adapt to the changing needs and fears of a given Christian society. Thus, during his 1411-12 preaching tour in Castile, the Dominican friar Vincent Ferrer identified a catalogue of things he considered problematic in Castilian society as "Jewish," from secular learning to infrequent confession to usury and avarice.¹ Observing that the use of the negative pole of Judaism could serve as "a powerful diagnostic tool for Christians to identify and condemn 'carnal tendencies' within their society and themselves," David Nirenberg still agrees with Rosemary Reuther that "the projection of carnality on the Jews facilitated the repression...of Christian anxiety about a great deal of 'materialism' and 'carnality' in their own beliefs and practices."² David M. Freidenreich affirms that in many early and medieval Christian sources, "the Jew is imagined to be the polar opposite of true Christianity and thus the embodiment of everything which Christians do not want to be themselves" (124). In this chapter, Freidenreich studies how Christian discourse about food associated with Jews serves as a foil for definitions of Christianity. He finds that a common element in such discourse is "the ascription of impurity to Jews and their food" (113).

In an earlier chapter of the book, Freidenreich explains that he has developed his typology of impurity from contemporary scholars of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism, as well as from medieval scholars of Islamic law (26). Given that the book aims to treat roughly equally content from the histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, one might assume that the development of such a typology should also draw on sources from Christianity, whether from, say, medieval Christian legal experts or from contemporary scholars of Christianity. The disconnect lies not

¹ David Nirenberg, "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain," *American Historical Review* 107 (October 2002): 1086–87. See St. Vincent Ferrer, *Sermons*, ed. José Sanchis Sivera and Gret Schib (Barcelona, 1932), 6: 104, 5: 221 and 147.

² Nirenberg, "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain," 1086–87. Nirenberg discusses arguments made by Rosemary Reuther in *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1974).

with faulty scholarship on Freidenreich's part, however, but in the dearth of such material with respect to Christianity. Christian sources tend to eschew detailed discussions about purity and impurity, because theoretically Christians have transcended such worries—witness Paul's discussion of Christian freedom in I Corinthians 8 or the statement in Titus 1:15 that "For the pure all things are pure, but for the defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure." Augustine argues that people who continue to observe dietary restrictions have misunderstood the meaning of Christ, and that "to them...nothing is pure, because they made an erroneous and sinful use both of what they received and of what they rejected."³ As Freidenreich notes, one of the common criticisms that Christians historically have levied against Jews has been the Jews' persistent clinging (blind, stubborn, or demonic depending on the Christian source) to such laws.

And yet, for all their criticism of the Jews for observing dietary restrictions and worrying about impurity, many Christian authorities continued to warn Christians about the impurity they could contract not only from Jewish food, but perhaps most significantly, from the Jews themselves.⁴ In the typology of impurity that he outlines in chapter two of his book, Freidenreich distinguishes three types of impurity: intrinsic, circumstantial, and offensive (see 26ff). Intrinsic impurity, in Jewish law, includes substances that are impure in their very nature, such as carrion and pork. Circumstantial impurity results from some form of contact with an intrinsically impure substance or "by the occurrence of a polluting event." In some cases this kind of impurity is considered contagious. It is temporary, however, and can be removed through adhering to "specified norms." Finally, offensive impurity results from behavior deemed gravely sinful. Freidenreich notes that this last kind of impurity is removed with great difficulty and sometimes not at all, leaving a permanent stain on the offender. In fact "in some purity systems, this defilement can carry over from one generation to the next" (27). Freidenreich demonstrates that the power of Christian rhetoric against Jews results in part from the repeated conflation by Christian authorities of these three kinds of impurity, such that the gravest of sins—killing Christ—results in a permanent, intrinsic impurity that passes from one generation to the next and that has the power to pollute Christians who come into contact with the perpetrators (123). In the case of fifteenth- and

³ Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 31.4. Freidenreich discusses Augustine's argument on p. 116. As Freidenreich observes, although Augustine directed his arguments against the Manichees, later Christians easily adapted the saint's arguments to the Jews, who also continued to observe dietary laws after the coming of Christ.

⁴ See pp. 124-126 for Freidenreich's discussion of Agobard of Lyon's writings in this regard.

sixteenth-century Spain, the rhetoric of Jewish impurity reached such a pitch that it encompassed even the Christian descendants of Jewish converts.

Perhaps what renders this kind of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric even more insidious is the fact that, as I discussed above, there is no extensive body of Christian literature, modern or medieval, devoted to the typology of impurity. During their exile from Nazi Germany, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote, "the morbid aspect of anti-Semitism is not projective behavior as such, but the absence from it of reflection."⁵ They explain that in the process of "false projection," "impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object—the prospective victim."⁶ As scholars such as Reuther and Nirenberg have observed, Christians have, often without reflection, projected onto Jews what they reject about their own beliefs and practices. Returning to the discourse by Christians about Jews and their food, the greatest problem is perhaps not that Christians have projected fears of impurity and defilement onto Jews, but that Christians have not reflected on those fears, having no framework to analyze them precisely because Christian theology has rejected such fears as not reflective of true Christianity, or rather as "Jewish." Freidenreich's study by no means solves all the problems of Christian anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism, and we must remember that Christian authorities and Christian societies historically vary in their portrayal of Jews and Jewish sin. Still, Freidenreich's analysis of common elements in Christian impurity rhetoric gives us a framework to discuss certain portrayals of Jews that appear in Christian history, allowing further opportunity for that reflection which distinguishes between subject and object and recognizes that our perceptions of "the other" reflect what we project out of ourselves.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (Verso, 1997), 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.