

Rings of Meaning: The *Judenring*, Religious Symbols, and the Practice of the Christian
Parable

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Abstract

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At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Pope Innocent III enjoined upon the rulers of Europe the requirement to have their Jewish and Muslim subjects visually distinguished from their Christian counterparts by manner of their dress. What resulted was an uneven, patchwork series of regional ordinances on the matter of Jewish dress across Catholic Europe, some of which were repealed and later reinstated, reflecting the complex relationship between the authority of the Catholic Church, who sought to uphold the sacred canons, and the authority of European monarchs, who had their own political and financial interests. Nonetheless, the form in which the identifying dress took varied from kingdom to empire. In the Holy Roman Empire, later the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, the most consistent identifier from the late 15th to the late 18th century for German Jews took the form of a badge in the shape of a yellow felt ring that was attached to the chest of the outermost garment, also known as a *Judenring*. This thesis is an investigation into the significance of the *Judenring* as a symbol in the Christian theology of the period, and how German Christians understood themselves and the Jewish ‘other’ in their society by way of the *Judenring*. First established in the sermons and treatises of both Catholic and later Lutheran thinkers, commentary on German Jews and the *Judenring* fascinated German Christians, appearing in popular moral stories and mass produced woodcuts and broadsides.

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Introduction

Starting in 392, Augustine of Hippo began writing and reflecting on the 150 psalms in what is now the Western Christian tradition. In his commentary on each hymn, he provided reflections that would become deeply influential in the creation of an early Christian theology which would serve as inspiration for generations of religious scholars, philosophers, and church officials. During his time as a bishop, he would also offer his commentary on the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, as he did with Psalm 59. This psalm is broadly understood as a hymn for divine protection against enemies, and Augustine offered the following interpretation:

But of the enemies themselves what? Slay them not, lest sometime they forget Your law. He is making request for his enemies, he is fulfilling the commandment... But what is it to be slain? To forget the law of the Lord. It is real death, to go into the pit of sin; this indeed may be also understood of the Jews... Those very enemies of mine, that have slain me, do not Thou slay. Let the nation of the Jews remain: ... Jews are not admitted into their city, and yet Jews there are. For all those provinces by the Romans have been subjugated. Who now can distinguish the nations in the Roman empire the one from the other, inasmuch as all have become Romans and all are called Romans?

The Jews nevertheless remain with a mark; nor in such sort conquered have they been, as that by the conquerors they have been swallowed up. Not without reason is there that Cain, on whom, when he had slain his brother, God set a mark in order that no one should slay him. [Genesis 4:15] This is the mark which the Jews have: they hold fast by the remnant of their law, they are circumcised, they keep Sabbaths, they sacrifice the Passover; they eat unleavened bread. These are therefore Jews, they have not been slain, they are necessary to believing nations... In order that He may show to us among our enemies His mercy. My God has shown to me in mine enemies. He shows His mercy to the wild-olive grafted on branches that have been cut off because of pride. Behold where they lie, that were proud, behold where you have been grafted, that lied: and be not proud, lest you should deserve to be cut off.¹

Saint Augustine recalled the ‘enemies’ of Christianity as the Jews, who he also mentioned as having broadly been absorbed as Roman within the Roman Empire though he would not

¹ Philip Schaff, “Psalm 59” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume VIII - St. Augustine: Expositions on the Psalms*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library (Grand Rapids: 1888) 241.

consider them to be equal to other ‘nations’ within the Roman Empire. Yet, he remarked that upon closer understanding, the Jewish people indeed live with a mark which differentiates them and their practice as Jewish and not Christian. He likened this mark to the mark of Cain, given by God after Cain had slayed his brother Abel as a reminder of his wicked act, but also as an outward symbol to the world of his infringement of natural order. Though this mark made Cain distinct and effectively separate, transforming him into a permanent fugitive and wanderer of the earth, God had also ensured that this mark would prevent Cain from being slayed himself. In this way, he was unable to escape the stigma of his act and was punished by his mark which ensured that he would never quite be accepted into the fold of society, but to wander the earth as a symbol himself. Augustine’s commentary likened the traditions of the Jews, and the adherence to Judaism more broadly, as a mark of Cain upon the Jews – something which set them apart from Christian society and ensures that they will stay upon the fringes of this society, never to fully participate or be accepted on the whole. Like Cain and his mark, Augustine wrote that the Jews and their mark are a living reminder to Christians of what it means to live outside of the faith and in so-called ignorance of true belief in the New Testament. As historian Jeremy Cohen remarks, Augustine’s commentary on the Jews set the tone for broader Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards Jews for centuries to come.²

Ideas and discussion of marking Jewish people continued past the age of Augustine and beyond church schisms. These would eventually result in the 68th canon of the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in November of 1215. The canon called on the sovereign rulers of Europe to implement a distinctive means of dress for both their Jewish and Muslim subjects to distinguish them from Christians.³ While this was far from the first time in both Jewish and Islamic history that such a requirement had been issued, this canon would have

² Jeremy Cohen, “‘Slay Them Not’: Augustine and the Jews in Modern Scholarship” in *Medieval Encounters*. Brill Publishers (Leiden: 1998) 78.

³ Henry Joseph Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*. St. Louis (B. Herder Book Co.: 1937) 290-291.

ramifications for centuries to come as a lingering influence for generations of Catholic authorities. Despite the influence of the canons within the Catholic Church, in most kingdoms it would take decades, and in some cases centuries, for such regulations to be seriously enacted and enforced. In 1530, the diet of Augsburg issued an updated criminal code that made it mandatory for Jews residing in the Holy Roman Empire to wear distinctive badges. The badge itself was a yellow cloth ring, made to be worn on the outer layer of clothing at all times in public. This newer and broader regulation would remain part of the imperial criminal code in the Empire for the next two hundred years approximately, at which point the enforcement had been largely disregarded and Jews in German-speaking regions had begun to forego wearing their yellow rings.⁴

In the broader field of German-Jewish history, this particular yellow ring badge requirement has been less investigated as a historical practice, owing in part to the more recent history of the yellow Star of David patch enforced upon German Jews under the Nazi government of the 20th century. While writing about the modern yellow badge, many historians have made mention of the yellow ring from centuries prior as evidence of a precedent in German history for the public identification of Jews, however the discussion of the practice often stops with this precedent.⁵ Little has been written about the yellow ring badge, also referred to as a *Judenring*, with regard to the implementation, effects on the Jews who wore them and the Christians who saw them, and the broader meaning behind the form of the badge itself. Why a yellow ring? Did this signify something specific to either Jews or Christians, or perhaps both? Moreover, what can the yellow ring tell us about the spiritual relationship between Christianity and Judaism and their adherents?

⁴ Sara Jablon, "Badge of Dishonor: Jewish Badges in medieval Europe" in *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*. Taylor and Francis Online (London: 2015) 44.

⁵ Guido Kisch, "The Yellow Badge in History" in *Historiae Judaica* (New York: 1942).

This thesis is an investigation of the *Judenring* policy enacted in the Holy Roman Empire from 1451 to the end of the 17th century, with an initial focus on the imperial free city of Frankfurt, and both theological and popular meanings of the symbol of the badge itself. By doing close readings of the original copies of badge ordinances issued by Frankfurt city council, church legislation on the matter of the badge, alongside visual and symbol analysis of religious woodcuts, printed caricatures, and popular printed sermons and biblical paraphrases from the period, I argue that the *Judenring* is itself a Christian religious symbol. The *Judenring* is steeped in both the biblical and popular Christian parables of the period, meant to not only enforce the segregation of German Christians and German Jews but to also shape the symbol of the ‘German Jew’. This symbol was crafted under terms and visual tropes that were understood by German Christians and rooted deeply in a medieval and early modern understanding of Christianity and its relationship to Judaism, a relationship where Christianity is understood to be the true faith of God and Judaism is understood to be a false religion. Through this connection, the visual symbol of the badge became a symbol of so-called Jewish perfidy. The themes of falsehood and truth in religion occur repeatedly throughout not only the sermons and paraphrases printed in this period, but they are also a significant structural component in the ordinances issued by Frankfurt city council, which referred to earlier synodal legislation as precedent. As the history of Christian spiritual toleration of Jews in the German Holy Roman Empire rapidly began to evolve with the coming of the German Enlightenment in the 18th century, the ways in which Christian Germans looked upon their Jewish countrymen began to change as well, which was reflected in both the ordinances issued for Jewish residents and in Christian visual and spiritual depictions of Jews and Judaism.

To follow these evolutions in popular religious thought and their effects on symbolism and badge ordinances, the first chapter explores medieval spiritual beliefs towards Jews within the boundary of the German Holy Roman Empire and the transmission of these beliefs to the

broader Christian population through parables and Bible paraphrases. The popular theology at the time was distilled from church leaders and thinkers, and shared with the commonfolk via sermons, biblical paraphrases, and parables that communicated not only explicit moral themes but also indirect symbolic relationships between Christianity and its adherents to their surroundings. As a result, many of the themes and ideas present in the popular interpretations of Christian theology would find themselves woven through world or proto-national histories like the *Weltchronik*, which were popular accounts of world history in the German language during the High Middle Ages. Chapter two looks at the connections between popular Christian belief and the woodcuts and broadsides that were also produced at the time as Christian commentaries on German Jews. I argue that it is at this point that the visual symbol of the *Judenring* goes from being a compulsory cloth badge to being a religious symbol, one that had a particular significance for Christian viewers, as it influenced their view of themselves as Christians and their attribution of qualities and actions on to the Jews they saw. From this, the conclusion will cover the enduring legacy of the *Judenring* even as it was gradually erased from the criminal code of the empire.

This thesis hopefully closes a gap in the English-language research on the topic of Jewish identification ordinances in the early modern Holy Roman Empire. It also contributes to the broader research on anti-Judaism by evaluating and contrasting the badge measures taken at the legislative level, the evolution of the ideas and sentiments of common people towards German Jews, and the theology that reinforced all of it. This thesis also adds to the existing literature on religious tolerance and the relationship between Christian institutions and Jews in German-speaking lands. More broadly, establishing and investigating the Christian symbolism involved in the creation of these Jewish ordinances gives us the ability to understand and then challenge the overt and covert attempts to create the Other. Assigning symbols and other indirect or covert signs, whether they are visual or verbal, to specific groups of people has the

potential to unify and strengthen or alienate and weaken the social conditions of a group. Perhaps the most glaring example in recent European history is the weaponization of the Star of David during the Second World War, emblazoned on the stores and homes of Jews and pinned to their outerwear as signs of the ‘racial enemy’ according to Nazi ideology. There is an existing precedent in European history for the forced public identification of Jews and of other groups who are deemed to be outside the accepted beliefs of the majority, and it is important to be able to identify further attempts at establishing this symbol-based othering. Many of the philosophies that influenced the creation and proliferation of Nazism had their roots in the early modern period of the Holy Roman Empire and in the delineations made between Christians and Jews by Christian authorities, Catholic and Protestant.

Historiography

In the German lands prior to the imperial institution of the yellow ring badge in the 16th century, Jews were easily identifiable by their conical hats. Known as *pileus cornutus* in Latin and more commonly referred to as simply the *pileus* or Judenhut in German-speaking regions, the earliest known visual depiction of the hat worn by a Jew dates back to an illustrated manuscript created in 1095.⁶ Art historians like Naomi Lubrich and Flora Cassen have written extensive histories about the history of the garment as a signifier of status and class, but also the transformation of the hat into a defining Jewish garment of medieval Europe, especially as it appeared in visual art from the period.⁷ Cassen in particular pays more attention to the concept of the Jewish badge, though exclusively in the context of the Italian Renaissance period after it was first introduced in 1394. Cassen also offers commentary on why the Jewish badge

⁶ Naomi Lubrich, “The Wandering Hat: Iterations of the Medieval Jewish Pointed Cap” in *Jewish History*. Springer (New York: 2015) 204.

⁷ Flora Cassen, *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy: Politics, Religion, and the Power of Symbols*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 2017).

in Italy took the shape of the letter O, but leaves the matter open to speculation, as will be discussed in chapter 2.⁸ In histories written about the Jews of Germany, the Judenhut is sometimes likened to an early iteration of the *Judenring* because it could also function as a signifier of the wearer's Jewish identity. Although as discussed by Lubrich, the *pileus* had once been part of the popular fashion at least in German-speaking areas, whereas the badge was never seen or depicted as a fashionable accessory.⁹ This is a key distinction to be made between the two accessories, as the hat was once willingly worn by Jews and the badge was always prescribed by Christian authorities onto Jews. However, this commentary provides several possible starting perspectives from which the yellow ring badge could be understood in the early modern German mixed Catholic – Protestant context.

Badges

In the European Christian world, the enforcement of badges to signify the wearer's Jewish identity are broadly believed to have started in approximately 1218 in England under Henry III (1216-1272), followed by Spain in 1219. For the next 250 years, territories under papal authority gradually introduced the badge or distinctive garment for Jews though the continuity and enforcement of the requirement varied significantly from region to region.¹⁰ To this end, Sara Jablon's 2015 article "Badge of Dishonor: Jewish Badges in medieval Europe" provides a condensed overview of medieval Jewish badges across Europe, focusing more so on the 13th and 14th centuries and without a specific geographic centre. Jablon makes specific note of the material, shape, and colour of the badges from this time, writing that they were primarily yellow or red and could vary significantly in shape between regions: the badge in

⁸ Ibid, 44-45.

⁹ Naomi Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat: Iterations of the Medieval Jewish Pointed Cap" in *Jewish History*. Springer (New York: 2015) 222.

¹⁰ Sara Jablon, "Badge of Dishonor: Jewish Badges in medieval Europe" in *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*. Taylor and Francis Online (London: 2015) 41.

England was in the form of the two tables of the Ten Commandments, while the badge in France was specified as being “round pieces of yellow felt or linen, a palm long and four fingers wide...”¹¹ Jablon also pays specific attention to the concept of the badge as a “stigma symbol” within a larger anti-Jewish social and legal system as well as how this medieval system compared to the badges of the later Nazi regime. She writes that “Though virulently anti-Semitic, medieval Catholic clerics repeatedly warned Christians that Jews were not to be entirely eliminated [from the borders of the faith] ... For the Nazis, however, their prime purpose was ‘to eradicate the entire Jewish community’...”¹² The first section of this statement will become a reoccurring theme throughout this thesis, as the religious motivations and symbolism of the German *Judenring* in the 1450s and later the 1530s will be examined.

Yellow

Art from the 15th century to the 17th century depicting German Jews made considerable use of visual cues and symbolic codes that were developed during the 13th and 14th centuries, and although this visual language was not restricted to depictions of Jews, it did make ‘the Jew’ as a figure significantly more visible.¹³ This visual language itself was also deeply rooted in the Christian theological understanding of Judaism, particularly in the relationship between the Christian Church and the Synagogue, along with the relationship between the Church and Jews as people. Visual works like Swiss-German artist Konrad Witz’s altar piece *Synagoga* from 1435 (fig.1) and his matching *Ecclesia* from the same year (fig. 2) demonstrate the perceived relationship between the Church and the Synagogue in a Church-dominated Europe.

¹¹ Ibid, 42.

¹² Ibid, 45.

¹³ Petra Schöner, “Visual Representations of Jews and Judaism in Sixteenth-Century Germany” in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation*. Brill (Leiden: 2006).



Figure 9: Konrad Witz, *Synagoga*, Oil on Wood, 1435, Kunst Museum Basel.



Figure 1: Konrad Witz, *Ecclesia*, Oil on Wood, 1435, Kunst Museum Basel.

From the first viewing of these works, the viewer is meant to understand the triumph and light of the Church, which is presented in *Ecclesia* through the light colours of the setting, her gaze pointed up towards the heavens, and her unbroken gold lance.

This is contrasted by *Synagoga*, who carries a dull and broken lance, her eyes cast down in defeat. The thin veil covering *Synagoga*'s eyes, a garment that does not appear in *Ecclesia*, is also an important piece which has a double meaning as a symbol of anti-Judaism. Her covered eyes are meant to demonstrate the ignorance of Judaism in the face of Christianity, which is accepted by the Christian majority in west-central Europe as the universal truth. Veils as a garment have also been subject to their own regulations regarding the identity of the wearer, primarily targeting Jewish women and prostitutes.¹⁴

Witz employs numerous visual cues that show the supposed superiority of the Church and New Testament over the inferior Synagogue and Old Testament, but perhaps what draws the eye of the viewer in are the solid colour robes worn by each figure. Indeed, they comprise a significant amount of visual space in each piece, but the colours of the robes themselves are also of interest, particularly *Synagoga*'s yellow robe. During the medieval period, the ordinary person in Europe would largely come into contact with rich, vibrant colours only in the context

¹⁴ Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Dress*. Funk & Wagnalls Co. (New York: 1967) 118.

of religious settings as vibrant dyes were costly and everyday garments were meant to last nearly a lifetime.¹⁵ The choice of clothing *Synagoga* in yellow is one particular to the European historical context and is yet another visual convention for Jewishness in European medieval and Renaissance art, as discussed by art historian Ruth Mellinkoff in her seminal work on symbolism in northern European art of the Middle Ages.¹⁶ As Mellinkoff contends, a bright colour like yellow, or red in some instances, could often serve to code an otherwise anonymous figure in a religious scene as Jewish, especially when contrasted with the visual code often applied to figures like Jesus Christ who was often depicted wearing cool and muted colours as a display of his sombre and virtuous status.¹⁷ In late medieval Europe, yellow as an individual colour had obtained an unfortunate ambivalent reputation, representing light and the sun but increasingly being associated with treachery, greed, and bodily excretions like urine and bile. Art historian Spike Bucklow contextualized this phenomenon of colour-material association as part of the pre-modern understanding of colour to the human eye. He writes that colours were considered to inherently possess the same attributes as the material they coloured.¹⁸ In his work *Colors Demonic and Divine*, medieval historian Herman Pleij writes that “Color in the Middle Ages was generally seen as a substance that was created or rendered visible by light refracting from an object ... It followed that objects of clarity and brilliance gave rise to the most beautiful colors.”¹⁹

Colour to the medieval and early modern mind was complex and charged with dual meaning, and so a study of the *Judenring* cannot rely solely on colour analysis though it will play an instructive role when analysing the broader semiotics of the badge. We must also

¹⁵ Carole P. Biggam and Kirsten Wolf, “Introduction: Color across Medieval Europe” in *A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age*. Bloomsbury Publishing (London: 2021) 2.

¹⁶ Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*. University of California Press (Berkeley: 1993).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

¹⁸ Spike Bucklow, “There’s More to Colour than Meets the Eye; Medieval and Early Modern Colour Perception” in *Clara*. University of Oslo (Oslo: 2020) 2-3.

¹⁹ Herman Pleij, *Colors Demonic and Divine: Shades of Meaning*. Columbia University Press (New York: 2005) 10.

consider the visibility of such a colour against the clothing worn by Jews, which according to written accounts from the period along with later monographs on historic Jewish dress was largely plain and monochromatic, typically in black. Yellow would have naturally been highly visible, further contributing to the stigma. With this understanding of colour in mind, it is important to consider along with the broader teachings on symbols and representative images within Christian teaching in order to gain a wholesome view of what the *Judenring* means as a symbol and why it was chosen to represent German Jews.

Frankfurt

The Jewish history of Frankfurt am Main could be described as somewhat of an exception to the trend of Jewish history in most other major German cities, owing in part to the status of Frankfurt as an imperial free city. As a free city, Frankfurt was accountable directly to the Holy Roman Emperor and organized internally by a city council, which meant that the city enjoyed more autonomy compared to the non-free cities. However, this autonomy was not enjoyed equally as the Jewish residents of Frankfurt were excluded from living in Frankfurt proper starting in 1462 with the construction of the *Judengasse*, the one small segment of the city where Jews were permitted to live and the first of its kind in Europe.²⁰ Despite their eventual segregation from Christian residents and the specific laws governing the community, Jewish presence in Frankfurt was continuous from the 14th century until the 20th century with one exception in 1614, which will be discussed later.²¹

While Frankfurt is used as a geographical point of departure for the beginning of this study, this thesis is an investigation of the practice, rhetoric, and presentation of the *Judenring* itself. The ideas and arguments behind the need for the badge transcended borders, and the

²⁰ Debra Kaplan, “Urban History on the Seam: Frankfurt’s Judengasse and the Early Modern City” in *Journal of Urban History*. Sage Journals (Thousand Oaks: 2024) 4.

²¹ Helmut Nordmeyer, *Zeittafel Frankfurt am Main*. Institut für Stadtgeschichte im Frankfurt am Main.

visual tropes in printed illustrations were shared between different linguistic regions, as will be shown in chapter 2.

Anti-Judaism and antisemitism

It must be noted that this thesis and the scholarship cited within uses the terms “anti-Judaism” or “anti-Jewish” when referring to discriminatory or offensive actions and statements against Jews in the medieval and early modern period. Though the polemics, images, and theological writings against Jews at the time used the language of religion as a way to explain disdain for the Jews and the necessity of laws that separated them from Christians, we can still see traces of racial antisemitism within the arguments that were used by the likes of Martin Luther. Marianne Moyaert’s article “Understanding the Difference Between Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism” lays out the traditional definitions of each as follows:

Anti-Judaism is religious hatred based on Christian theological misconceptions of the role of the Jewish people in God’s plan of salvation... Significantly, the assumption goes that anti-Judaism has little to do with race, in the sense of innate (hereditary) Jewish biological characteristics. Jews were targeted for what they believed, or what they failed to believe, not for who they were as people.

Antisemitism, on the other hand, is a modern phenomenon, which builds on pseudo-scientific race theories that began to emerge in the eighteenth century against the background of secularization, colonization, and nation-building. Racist ideologies assume it is possible to categorize, essentialize, rank, and govern people based on innate, naturalized, and immutable differences.²²

As Moyaert later discusses, there is a tendency to keep the two phenomena separate; that is, to relegate anti-Judaism to the pre-Enlightenment era and earlier, and antisemitism from the

²² Marianne Moyaert, “Understanding the Difference Between Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism” in *Antisemitism Studies*. Indiana University Press (Bloomington: 2022) 376-77.

Enlightenment era to present day.²³ However, there is not necessarily such a clean distinction between the so-called periods of religious anti-Judaism and racial antisemitism, as will be discussed throughout this thesis. The *Judenring*, even in the period of widespread use, could often represent different aspects of anti-Judaism that contained early elements of the racial antisemitism that Moyaert discussed above. By analysing the *Judenring* during a period of great theological, philosophical, and social transformation, the approach of this thesis bridges the period of late medieval and early modern anti-Judaism with the development of Enlightenment-era ideas on categorisation of so-called immutable traits.

From theology to popular religion

From the Middle Ages until the Enlightenment and often after, the legislation and ordinances passed by city councils could often cite or make linguistic reference to earlier decisions made by cardinal legates or local synods as precedent for the inclusion of a new or updated law. Tracing these precedents is highly important in discerning the origins of a law, particularly when there is no stated explanation for why the law takes on the form that it does. Additionally, how does the average person make sense of the law, and of the religious interpretation behind the importance of said law? This question is especially important in the fragmented and ever-changing policies of the German Holy Roman Empire and would become ever more important with the Reformation of the 16th century. This was indeed the case with decisions taken by German cardinals acting on behalf of the Pope in the Holy Roman Empire. As such, examining the interpretations by theologians of both the Bible and the Christian-Jewish dynamic is essential to making sense of their ordinances and prescriptions, especially as they relate to measures taken against Jews. Just as Saint Augustine used Psalm 59 as his basis to call for a Christian marking of Jews, Christian interpretations of other psalms, gospels,

²³ Ibid, 380-81.

and parables continued to be utilised well after the time of Augustine in the pursuit of identifying the Jews and understanding the Christian self. In this regard, Paul Tilich's article "The Religious Symbol" provides a four-part framework for identifying the religious symbol as denoted by the symbol's figurative quality, perceptibility, innate power, and acceptability.²⁴

Similar to Tilich, David d'Avray's "Symbolism and Medieval Religious Thought" orients the study of symbolism as a central and essential piece to medieval religion, though it has often gone undeveloped in more mainstream histories.²⁵ While d'Avray also writes that "medieval religion cannot be reduced to symbolism"²⁶, he states that the religious symbolism of the medieval age "was a complex and sophisticated form of thought"²⁷. The way in which theologians after Augustine made sense of Christianity and the Bible during the turbulence and religious upheavals of the high and late medieval periods is reflected in their treatment of the unknown and the unfamiliar. D'Avray remarks that this was important particularly for the study of the Old Testament by Christian scholars, who struggled to understand the parts that did not figure into their religion at all, but also in acquainting broader Christian audiences with the ideas and morals of both the New and Old Testaments.²⁸

The different components of the badge, such as its colour, shape, and material are all suggestive and representative of the broad Christian attitude towards Jews, but the combination of these components along with the inclusion and interpretation of the ring in Christian theology and the subsequent moral allegories produced for public consumption are what give the *Judenring* further significance. The visual form of the badge was not an arbitrary sign that was imposed solely for the basic purpose of public identification of Jews, but a symbol that told the Christian viewer who the wearer was and their alleged fundamental opposition to

²⁴ Paul Tilich, "The Religious Symbol" in *Daedalus*. MIT Press (Cambridge: 1958) 3-4.

²⁵ David d'Avray, "Symbolism and Medieval Religious Thought" in *The Medieval World*. Routledge (New York: 2018) 303.

²⁶ Ibid, 302.

²⁷ Ibid, 307.

²⁸ Ibid, 309.

Christianity, and as a result, their fundamental opposition to the acceptable, virtuous, and spiritually ‘true’ society. To this end, Iris Shagrir’s *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture* provides a chronology along with literary foregrounding for one of the most consequential parables to be discussed in this thesis. As Shagrir writes, the parable of the three rings underwent considerable changes from the first appearance of the story in 8th century Baghdad and the subsequent retelling and printings of the story in medieval and early modern Europe.²⁹ At the core of the parable, despite the changing of setting and character details over the course of centuries, is a story of doubt in the idea of one ‘true’ faith of the three Abrahamic religions. While Shagrir’s work concludes with the analysis of a set of Christian-Muslim dialogues from the late 14th century which made use of the parable, the influence and popularity of the parable continues far beyond this point, particularly throughout Christian western Europe.³⁰ Later in the 16th century, during a period of increasing religious turmoil, church authorities would often remove the parable from printed collections or modify the ending so that the ambiguity of the parable now read as certainty in the ‘truth’ or correct belief of Christianity. This trajectory is aligned with the implementation of the *Judenring* in the German Holy Roman Empire, along with the increase in sermons and polemics from Catholic and Lutheran preachers alike which expounded upon the falsehood of Judaism, alongside Islam and rival varieties of Christianity. To this end, we see the symbolism of so-called Christian truth and Jewish falsehood represented not only through parables and other Bible paraphrases, but through sermons and polemics, and indeed in the very ordinances targeting German Jews which were passed by both religious and secular officials.

By combining the study and analysis of religious symbols and visual tropes, along with the religious texts and sermons from which these symbols and tropes are derived from, we can

²⁹ Iris Shagrir, *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2019) 121.

³⁰ Ibid, 117-119.

make better sense of why the ordinances were deemed necessary. The interpretation of religious texts in particular along with the commentaries produced at the time have undergone several remarkable transformations over several hundred years. The ways of thinking and seeing that were employed by representatives of the medieval Catholic Church, or Martin Luther, are not necessarily popular perspectives today but are nonetheless part of the *longue durée* of German history.

Chapter 1: The symbol in religion and religion in the symbol

[I]n each being is hidden a divine thought; the world is a book written by the hand of God in which every creature is a word charged with meaning.³¹

Since the 13th century, Frankfurt and the surrounding cities to the west in the Rhineland were an important centre of Ashkenazi Jewish religious and cultural history. Frankfurt in particular stands out, as the largely uninterrupted Jewish presence in the city saw the *Judengasse* develop into one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe, though the Christian residents and city council did not always enjoy the presence of Frankfurt's Jews as a matter of religion. Catholic and later Protestant authorities involved in the local administration of the city found themselves caught between the teachings of Christianity and the place that Jews occupied within Christian doctrine, and the financial benefit that the presence of the Jewish community brought to the city. On the unique circumstances of the city at the dawn of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, Maximilian Scholz wrote, "The independence enjoyed by imperial cities like Frankfurt allowed them to embrace Luther and his reforms, and a vast majority of these cities did so in the first half of the sixteenth century. But while they embraced Luther's reforms, imperial cities remained beholden to the emperor and the institutions of the empire, which were in turn beholden to the Catholic Church."³² This duality of Christian practice, in spite of the eventual Lutheran domination of the city council in the 16th century, is reflected in parts of the laws governing the Jews of Frankfurt.

While expulsions and massacres of Jews in Frankfurt had ended after the plague outbreak of 1348, the legal obligations of the community were still complex. As an imperial free city, the city council had gained the right from the emperor to tax and govern the Jews

³¹ Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image*. J. M. Dent & Sons (London: 1913) 29.

³² Maximilian Miguel Scholz, *Strange Brethren: Refugees, Religious Bonds, and Reformation in Frankfurt, 1554-1608*. University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville: 2022) 7.

The cover of the *Juden Stättigkeit* of 1614 features a drawing of the *Judenring* itself, placed in the centre of the page in a muddled yellow colour. The inclusion of the ring on the cover of course visually presented it as the de facto symbol of the Jewish residents, but it is the text written in the hole of the ring that is even more notable (fig. 4).

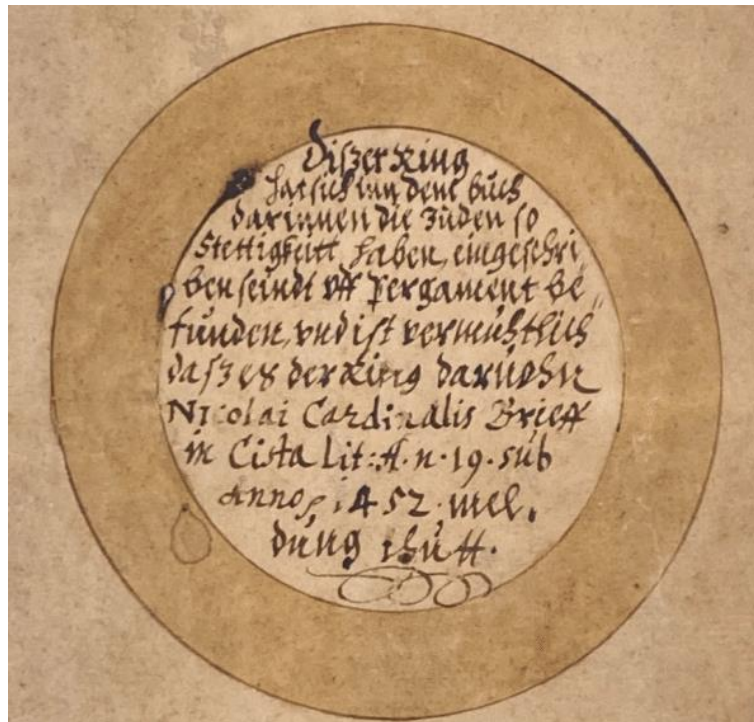


Figure 11: The *Judenring* from the cover of the Frankfurt *Judenstättigkeit*, 1614. ISG FFM, H.17.08, 516. Reproduced by permission of Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main.

The text in translation reads as follows:

This ring was found in the book in which the Jews who had a residence were inscribed on parchment, and it is presumed that it is the ring mentioned in Cardinal Nicholas' letter in [Cista Lit. A.N. 19, sub Anno 1452].³⁴

While the Frankfurt city council decided to include the yellow ring on the cover of their *Juden Stättigkeit*, the authors also decided to leave a small note regarding the origin of the symbol as having not been their creation. Rather, they credit the symbol to a “a book in which the Jews who had a residence were inscribed on parchment” referring to a previous *Stättigkeit*,

³⁴ *Judenstättigkeit* von 1614. H.17.08, 516. Institut für Stadtgeschichte im Frankfurt am Main (ISG FFM).

as this is where the names and addresses of all the Jews living in the ghetto were kept. Further, they credit the ring found in this previous edition to a letter written by a “Cardinal Nicholas” from 1452. To understand who Cardinal Nicholas is, and what his contribution is to the ring ordinance issued nearly two centuries after his time, it is necessary to go back a few centuries in German Catholic history.

Identification in the Late Middle Ages

Before tracing the use and symbolism of the *Judenring* and the involvement of Cardinal Nicholas, it is important to note that by the Late Middle Ages there was no universal identifying symbol of Judaism akin to the cross for Christianity or the crescent moon for Islam under the Ottomans.³⁵ The symbol most commonly associated with Jews and Judaism in the modern age is the six-point Star of David, however this symbol only saw broad adoption in the 19th century.³⁶ As a result, the Jews appeared to Christians as a people with no identifying symbol. It is perhaps this lack of a universal Jewish symbol in a time so heavily dictated by visual codes and customs that could have driven some of the fervour for the marking of Jews, a desire to make the unknown and different appear known and familiar in a visual language understood by the Christian majority. On the appeal of medieval symbolism for religious writers, David D’Avray writes “[t]he symbolism of nature helped them make sense of the world. More important, it helped them make sense of the Bible, especially the parts of the Old Testament that seemed otherwise irrelevant or even shocking to Christians.”³⁷

Attitudes towards German Jews within the empire fluctuated significantly depending on the political stance of the emperor and the religious interpretation of the pope, along with

³⁵ H.E. Hayes, “The Crescent as Symbol of Islam” in *The Muslim World*. Hartford International University (Hartford: 1919)

³⁶ Gershom Scholem, “The Curious History of the Six-Pointed Star” in *Commentary*. American Jewish Committee (New York: 1949) 244.

³⁷ David d’Avray, “Symbolism and Medieval Religious Thought” in *The Medieval World*. Routledge (New York: 2018) 309.

the position of regional princes depending on the area. Broadly speaking, the attitude towards German Jews during the 15th century in the politically fractured empire could be described as highly ambivalent and heavily coloured by the ideas of those with the power to enact life-altering ordinances, such as expulsions. As a result of the expulsions of Jews from several cities in the German Holy Roman Empire during the 15th and 16th centuries, alongside the migration of Jews from France and later from Spain into the empire, the century itself has been described as one of “forced mobility”.³⁸ Restrictions or limitations on movement to and from cities had already been put in place by the 15th century, and the movement and visibility of Jews within cities was also controlled though the extent varied from city to city. The latter requirement stems from canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council, where Pope Innocent III prescribed restrictions on Jewish presence and visibility in the three days leading up to and including Easter, with a particular emphasis on their invisibility on Good Friday.³⁹ Further contained in this canon is the requirement of all Christian rulers to enforce a distinguishing dress on their Jewish and Saracen populations in their territories. Innocent III stated the following:

In some provinces a difference in dress distinguishes the Jews or Saracens from the Christians, but in certain others such a confusion has grown up that they cannot be distinguished by any difference. Thus it happens at times that through error Christians have relations with the women of Jews or Saracens, and Jews and Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, that they may not, under pretext of error of this sort, excuse themselves in the future for the excesses of such prohibited intercourse, we decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress. Particularly, since it may be read in the writings of Moses [Numbers 15:37-41], that this very law has been enjoined upon them.⁴⁰

³⁸ Michael Toch, “The Formation of a Diaspora: The Settlement of Jews in the Medieval German Reich,” in *Aschkenaz*. De Gruyter (Berlin: 1997) 68.

³⁹ H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*. B. Herder (St. Louis: 1937) 290-291.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

With this canon, Innocent III attempted to not only clearly identify Jews and Muslims as such, but to segregate them from Christian society. He framed the dress requirement as necessary to prevent sexual contact between the different groups, which he described as happening through ‘error’ rather than as a choice made between individuals. Fears over the mixing of Christians and Muslims or Jews continued to concern the Church after Innocent III, as Pope Gregory IX later remarked both Jews and Saracens “were known to engage in sexual intercourse with Christians ‘not only in error’ but through intentional dissimulation and religious fraud, feigning Christian identity in order to seduce, deceive and, ultimately, convert Christians.”⁴¹ While the explicitly stated justification for the canon is the prevention of interreligious mingling, it can be implicitly understood that Catholic authorities feared the utilization of an inauthentic Christian identity and the deception of the true virtuous people. The inclusion of Numbers 15:37-41 from the Old Testament is a fascinating reference. The passage cited reads as follows:

[37] The Lord also said to Moses:

[38] Speak to the children of Israel, and thou shalt tell them to make themselves fringes in the corners of their garments, putting in them ribands of blue:

[39] That when they shall see them, they may remember all the commandments of the Lord, and not follow their own thoughts and eyes going astray after divers things,

[40] But rather being mindful of the precepts of the Lord, may do them and be holy to their God.

[41] I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that I might be your God.⁴²

Jews were commanded by God to tie fringes, or tzitzit, to the corners of their clothing as a reminder of God’s commandments, essentially serving as a distinguishing sign within Judaism. Innocent III essentially stated that because this specific manner of dress is already a

⁴¹ Irven Resnick, “The Jews’ Badge” in *Jews and Muslims under the Fourth Lateran Council*. Brepols (Turnhout: 2018) 79.

⁴² Numbers 15:37-41 Vulgate.

requirement of practicing Jews, another distinguishing element added to their daily dress was not an unreasonable request though he did not mention what physical form this distinguishing mark should take. At the same time, this could also be understood as an attempt by Innocent III to replicate the significance of the fringes with his requirement for distinguishing dress. The fringes served as a reminder to the wearer of God's commandments and another reminder of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, while Innocent's distinguishing garb served as a reminder to others of the wearer's status as a non-Christian. While the fringes were important to the wearer, the new distinguishing garb was important to those viewing the wearer.

At the time the canon was issued in 1215, the reaction of European rulers was limited. Pope Innocent III died the following year in 1216, and his successor Honorius III dismissed the requirement in a letter to the archbishop of Bordeaux in 1221. He wrote that he "did not insist upon forcing a special garb on Jews for they could be distinguished without resorting to such means."⁴³ Papal sentiment over such a requirement would shift back and forth between the thinking of Innocent III and Honorius III for some time, making it challenging to properly introduce the requirement anywhere. There was also the matter of physical form, as Innocent III did not specify *how* they should be marked off. The continuity of these ordinances varied significantly, as policing them proved to be difficult and the later plague epidemic of the mid 14th century would shift the focus away from such requirements. It would take until 1532 for the German Holy Roman Empire to prescribe a badge or special mode of dress for Jews, owing in part to the devastation of the plague in the 14th century, but also as a result of the internal fragmentation of the patchwork states that constituted the empire. Within this patchwork, there was a desire for reform at the ecclesiastical level from the pope and the cardinals he sanctioned to work on his behalf, and later at the imperial level between different emperors. In both

⁴³ Raphael Straus, "The "Jewish Hat" as an Aspect of Social History" in *Jewish Social Studies*. Indiana University Press (Bloomington: 1942) 65.

instances, unification or consolidation of ideas and people were important issues and rooting out or otherwise defining those ideas or people who did not belong was paramount to the project. One of the first important attempts a broad-sweeping badge requirement in late medieval Germany came in the form of ordinances issued by papal legate Nicholas of Cusa.

Signs of difference and denunciation

By the 15th century, the study of Christian mysticism within the Catholic faith had begun to pick up in popularity, including in the German Holy Roman Empire. How did Christian mystics and medieval theologians figure Jews into their doctrine and how was it acted upon in practice? The writings and reform measures of cardinal Nicholas of Cusa during his time as a papal legate to Germany and in his later life demonstrate this relationship as one of contradiction and constraint.

Nicholas of Cusa, born in the Rhineland town of Kues in 1401, was an influential theologian, polymath, and jurist during his time. He was elevated as a cardinal by Pope Nicholas V in 1448 and toured Germany starting in 1451 as a legate, where he attracted attention and controversy from the German princes and emperor Frederick III for his ecclesiastic reforms. On April 30, 1451, Cusa issued the following decree for the first time at the diocesan synod at Bamberg:

Since it is incumbent upon us by our duty to enforce, as far as is within our power, the observance of the sacred canons, in which it is found concerning the Jews, among other things, that Jews should be distinguished from Christians in dress and that they should not only not practice usurious wickedness, but also be compelled to restitution of usury, it is for this reason that we, desiring that humanity be shown to the Jews themselves in the diocese of Bamberg... we decree and order that from the feast of Saint Peter in chains which is now coming soon, each and every Jew living in the diocese of Bamberg shall inscribe a circle, the diameter of which is not smaller than the average man's finger, in front of his chest on his garment or cloak, openly and publicly, so that it appears to the eyes of all who behold them, made of yellow thread and visibly

sewn as a sign of difference, so that they are distinguished from Christians, must wear and be held... But if from the said time onwards they do not abstain from usury and do not wear the prescribed signs of denunciation openly, from that time on the whole parish, where such Jews have stayed or been, shall be subject to an ecclesiastical and most strict interdict, which we also from that time on as from now and from now on as from now on in the case aforesaid, with the approval of the said sacred council, do suppose to be an ecclesiastical and most strict interdict.⁴⁴

Over the course of the next year, Cusa had the same decree issued across Germany: Nuremberg in 1451; Minden, Frankfurt, Bingen, Salzburg, and Würzburg in 1452. The text for each decree was the same from diocese to diocese and followed the same points, namely the enforcement of the “sacred canons” of the church and the connection of Jewish usury and the badge requirement as was laid out in canons 67 and 68 of Lateran IV, respectively. It is important to note that in his preamble, Cusa stated the following: “it is for this reason that we, desiring that humanity be shown to the Jews themselves in the diocese of Bamberg...”⁴⁵ This would seem to imply that the identifying badge is a humane remedy for dealing with the Jews on the part of the diocese, and that it would still allow for humanity to be shown to them. It would also imply a certain level of paternalism, as if to say, ‘we are instituting this policy for your own good’. Additionally, the punishment for the dioceses found in violation of Cusa’s decree were also the same. The punishment of ecclesiastical interdict for dioceses if the local Jews were found to be in violation of the ordinance was severe. It meant that the Christians in the territory of the diocese could be officially suspended from practicing their sacred rites and participating in festivals and holidays. Such a penalty could have resulted in serious retributive violence taken against the Jews, whom the Christians would see as the cause of the interdict.

⁴⁴ Moritz Stern, *Urkundliche Beiträge über die Stellung der Päpste zu den Juden*. H. Fiencke (Kiel: 1893), 52. Translation of the text is my own.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 52.

Physical violence against German Jews by German Christians had already coloured the 14th century, as the last massacre of Jews in Frankfurt took place in July 1349 following the peak of plague deaths that summer.⁴⁶ The continuation of blood libel and host desecration accusations later contributed to the expulsions of all Jews from most of the major urban areas around the empire during the 15th century, with the exception of Frankfurt. Even when invited back by a new regional prince or the emperor himself, Jews living in or near these major cities found themselves living precariously under the threat of expulsion at any time, for a variety of reasons.⁴⁷ With his ordinance, Cusa put the responsibility for managing the visibility of Jews across Germany in the hands of both Jews and Christians, and though his punishment explicitly targeted Christians in their ability to remain in the fold of the church through the diocese, the implicit threat of possible retribution taken out on the Jews would have been clear in their minds.

As Cusa travelled from city to city, dissent from not only local Jews but emperor Frederick III (1452-93) had begun to mount. As King of Germany (1440-93), Frederick III had been notably more tolerant of German Jews than his predecessor, Albert II (1438-39). During the reign of Albert II, he oversaw and welcomed the expulsion of Jews around the empire, such as the expulsion from Augsburg in 1439.⁴⁸ However, the ascent of Frederick III saw an attempt at smoothing over the relationship of the Jews with the imperial authority. Selma Stern-Taeubler explained Frederick's tolerance towards the Jews as "dictated by his own goodness of heart and sense of justice. But above all he was convinced that the regal right in the Jews was 'a part of the constitutional prerogative of the head of the Reich'; 'as Roman Emperor of the Holy Empire' the Jews were 'directly and solely subject and belonging to him and no one

⁴⁶ Michael Schraer, "Precedents: 1096-1391" in *The Contagion of Violence: 1391 and the Jews of the Spanish Kingdoms*. Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2025) 86.

⁴⁷ Kerice Doten-Snitker, "The Diffusion of Exclusion: Medieval Expulsions of Jews" in *Comparative Political Studies*. Sage Publications (Thousand Oaks: 2024).

⁴⁸ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews: Volume 4*. Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia: 1894) 180.

else.⁴⁹ During the issuing of Cusa's badge ordinances, Frederick III wrote to Cusa and to Pope Nicholas V demanding that the ordinances be revoked.⁵⁰ Frederick was not alone in his dissent, as the bishop of Bamberg also petitioned for the annulment of the ordinances on the basis that it would lead to the flight of the Jews from the city, thereby causing issues for the regional princes who depended on the finances of the Jews to administer their land.⁵¹ In May of 1452, Nicholas V lifted the ecclesiastical interdict incurred by the Jews of Nuremberg for the violation of the ordinance, and in March of 1453 until his death in 1455, Nicholas V revoked the ordinances entirely.⁵² In his letter on the matter from March 1453, Nicholas V stated the following as his reasoning for lifting the ordinances:

... although the perfidy of the Jews is rightly considered distasteful to all orthodox believers, because nevertheless the prophetic word reminds us that their relics must be saved, the apostolic kindness of the See and the piety of the Christian religion deem them not to be eliminated from the borders of the faithful, but rather to be tolerated in view of the Deity, *whose image they bear*, and the humanity, even as a testimony to the Jews' king, Christ our Lord, he willingly expends the ministries of his provision, lest, by supporting the Jews with the said faithful in their residence and sojourn, any scruple of the conscience of the same faithful and the expense of their own property be affected, and the Jews themselves in their sojourn in which they are fostered among the faithful, be troubled with such burdens.⁵³

Though he stated the broader Christian disdain for Jewish usury, with his remark that "... because nevertheless the prophetic word reminds us that their relics must be saved," Nicholas V alluded to the Augustinian belief on Jewish witness, much like the commentary offered by

⁴⁹ Selma Stern-Taubler, "Principles of German Policy towards the Jews at the Beginning of the Modern Era" in *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. Leo Baeck Institute (New York: 1956) 18.

⁵⁰ Moritz Stern, *Urkundliche Beiträge über die Stellung der Päpste zu den Juden*. H. Fiencke (Kiel: 1893), 57-58.

⁵¹ Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (Toronto: 1991) 217.

⁵² Moritz Stern, *Urkundliche Beiträge über die Stellung der Päpste zu den Juden*. H. Fiencke (Kiel: 1893), 58-62.

⁵³ Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews - Documents: 1394-1464*. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (Toronto: 1989), 994-995. Translation and emphasis are my own.

Augustine on Psalm 59: “These are therefore Jews, they have not been slain, they are necessary to believing nation...”⁵⁴ He also extended his rationale in the statement that although he saw Cusa’s badge was intended as a testimony to Christ, it would have troubled the Christian residents too much because they were at risk of ecclesiastic interdict, while The idea expressed by Nicholas V, that “... the Christian religion deem them not to be eliminated from the borders of the faithful, but rather to be tolerated in view of the Deity, whose image they bear...”⁵⁵ is not unlike the theological and philosophical works of his legate, Nicholas of Cusa. During his time as legate in Germany and later as bishop of Brixen in Tyrol, Cusa wrote numerous treatises on philosophical theology and sermons that were in no doubt informed by his experiences in attempting to reform the church in the German Holy Roman Empire and the relationship between not only Jews and Christians but also Jews and Christianity itself. One of Cusa’s earliest sermons along with perhaps one of his best-known treatises from his later life are pertinent to understanding his conception of the symbolic importance of the ring badge for the Jews and their visibility in particular: his sermon *Fides autem Catholica* (The Catholic Faith) from 1431 and *De Pace Fidei* (On the Peace of Faith) from 1453.

The Catholic Faith

Cusa’s sermon from 1431 provided a clear view of how Christians should make sense of and view their faith. Contained in the first volume of sermons he had given in his career, the foundations of his mystic-symbolist thought are delivered plainly. He opened his sermon with an extended exposition on the Trinity, in which he stated:

But since man as recreated and regenerated was supposed to be restored and made righteous, his soul... has to be made righteous by means of the three theological virtues. Hence, just as the image of creation consists of a trinity of Persons and a oneness of

⁵⁴ Philip Schaff, “Psalm 59” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume VIII - St. Augustine: Expositions on the Psalms*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library (Grand Rapids: 1888) 241.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Essence, so the image of re-creation consists of a trinity of fixed dispositions... together with a oneness of grace.⁵⁶

From this sermon through to the last treatises he wrote, Cusa continued to develop the metaphor of three pieces uniting into one whole. While he did not invent the allegory of the Trinity as being a ‘trinity of Persons’ outright, it is important to briefly include his writings on the matter as it will establish an important motif when discussing his approach to philosophizing peace amongst the three Abrahamic religions later on in this chapter. His contribution to the matter of faith was also substantial, wherein he wrote:

Moreover, because faith is a divine light that descends from God and [does] not [arise] from things, there will be one true faith that descends from the one God... Moreover, there is one faith common to all believers, just as the articles of faith are common to all Christians. Now, all men are bound to a single divine worship that is owed [to God]. Therefore, there will be one single faith. And whatever is counter to this divine and owed worship and to [this] one faith is an error that is to be extirpated[sic] by fire and sword.⁵⁷

It is his discussion on the matter of faith and what it is for Catholics that tells his audience what to make of other faiths. All men owe their worship to a singular God, and that there is a singular and correct faith which connects man to God and the divine, thereby uniting them. From this sermon and through the rest of his works, Cusa returns to the idea of a oneness of not only man and faith, but of multiple faiths and God. However, the later portion of this sermon illustrates the symbolic aspect of Cusa’s rationale even further. He begins by likening objects to faith, putting the immeasurable and intangible into a physical state of matter. He likens faith to the ark of the testament, a star of the firmament and of the sea, but his most curious comparison is to a ring:

⁵⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Fides autem Catholica*. Koblenz, 1431. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Early Sermons: 1430-1441*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Loveland: 2003) 95

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 100.

[Faith], is like a ring adorning a finger. In a similar way, faith adorns reason that is betrothed to God. (Osee 2: “I will betroth you to me in faith.”) And faith is a silver ring, because it gleams by way of true knowledge and resonates by means of confession. (Romans 10: “With the heart one believes unto justice; with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”)⁵⁸

Rings have long stood as a symbol of unity in both Jewish and Christian tradition, a symbolism which has been bolstered by the exchange of rings during wedding ceremonies, the creation and bestowing of the Ring of the Fisherman during the inauguration of a new pope, and perhaps most important are the many giftings of rings that are mentioned in the Bible. This passage of Cusa’s sermon provides a very concrete understanding of what a ring is seen as: not only is it an accessory for the physical body, but it is also a sign of faith and particularly a sign of faith in the one Christian God. It is with this portion of the sermon where the greater idea of betrothal to faith and to God are made clear, and the portions of the Bible which he cited as his evidence for this comparison are also deeply telling.

Osee 2 refers to Hosea 2, which is the second chapter of the Book of Hosea in the Old Testament. Hosea 2 is comprised of 25 verses which tell the story of Israel, personified as an adulterous woman, who leaves the grace of God for his enemy, Baal.⁵⁹ By leaving God for Baal, Israel does not acknowledge the gifts given to her by God, namely grain, olive oil, silver, and gold, and instead she uses them for Baal. God sees this and revokes his gifts; he sees Israel burn incense and wear earrings and jewels for Baal as she forgets God and worships Baal instead. God leads Israel into the wilderness and when she is there, stripped of her gifts and

⁵⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Fides autem Catholica*. Koblenz, 1431. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Early Sermons: 1430-1441*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Loveland: 2003) 103.

⁵⁹ The name Baal here refers to a Canaanite deity that Israel worships instead of God, but Baal has also been used in Hebrew to mean ‘owner’ or ‘lord’ and has been used by some as another name for the devil.

adornments that betroth her to Baal, that he gives her vinedressers to cull her of this attachment to Baal.⁶⁰ The chapter closes with the following verses:

[19] And I will espouse thee to me for[sic] ever: and I will espouse thee to me in justice, and judgement, and in mercy, and in commiserations.

[20] And I will espouse thee to me in faith: and thou shalt know that I am the Lord.

[21] And it shall come to pass in that day: I will hear, saith the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth.

[22] And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and these shall hear Jezrahel.

[23] And I will sow her unto me in the earth, and I will have mercy on her that was without mercy.

[24] And I will say to that which was not my people: Thou art my people: and they shall say: Thou art my God.⁶¹

This chapter of Hosea sees the transformation of the adulterous and wayward Israel, who has strayed from her devotion to the true God in favour of a false god in Baal, as she is stripped of her earthly materials and adornments and reunited with God in espousal. However, in following the symbolic use of this passage in Cusa's sermon on the singularity of true faith in a true God, this passage can be interpreted as Israel who represents the Israelites from whom the Jews in Cusa's time were descendants, God as the singular Christian god, and the worship of Baal as the false worship of an equally false god. Cusa used this chapter in the Book of Hosea from the Old Testament to accuse contemporary Jews, who of course did not believe in the Christian interpretation of God, of the same spiritual waywardness that the personified Israel was guilty

⁶⁰ The word "vinedresser" has a dual significance in the Bible: in a literal sense, it refers to a gardener tending to the vines of a plant. In the Bible, the vinedresser and the vine or vineyard are traditionally understood as an allegory for God and his people, respectively.

⁶¹ Hosea 2:19-24 Vulgate. This translation of the Latin Vulgate was first published by the English College at Doulay, and then re-published in 1899 by Reverend Dr. Denvir and printed in New York. While this translation is not the exact one used by Jasper Hopkins in his translation of Cusa's sermon, the translation used above still gives us a good understanding of what Cusa would have been reading as someone who read and wrote his treatises as well as his sermons in Latin and during the popularity of the Vulgate Bible.

of. This is further strengthened by the inclusion of Romans 10 at the end of Cusa's initial ring simile:

“And faith is a silver ring, because it gleams by way of true knowledge and resonates by means of confession. (Romans 10: “With the heart one believes unto justice; with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”)⁶²

Romans 10 is the tenth chapter of Epistle to the Romans, which is the sixth book of the New Testament and composed by Paul the Apostle. The chapter has long been debated in religious scholarship for the implication that Paul, having been converted to Christianity by the time of the epistle, is speaking directly to the Jewish people about the nature of their disbelief in Christ and subsequently their disbelief in the true, real God. However, in the earlier chapters both Jews and Christians are admonished for not living the law set forth by God despite professing their belief in the law.⁶³ Cusa stated the silver ring gleams because of true knowledge and resonates by means of confession and in Romans 10, Paul states the following:

Brethren, the will of my heart, indeed, and my prayer to God, is for them unto salvation. For I bear them witness, that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, not knowing the justice of God, and seeking to establish their own, have not submitted themselves to the justice of God.
For the end of the law is Christ, unto justice to every one that believeth.⁶⁴

In the 1609 English translation of the Latin Vulgate from which the text above came from, Romans 10 is described with the following: “The end of the law is faith in Christ; which the Jews refusing to submit to, cannot be justified.”⁶⁵ Romans 10 concludes with the following:

But all do not obey the gospel. For Isaias saith: *Lord, who hath believed our report?*
Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ.

⁶² Nicholas of Cusa, *Fides autem Catholica*. Koblenz, 1431. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Early Sermons: 1430-1441*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Loveland: 2003) 103.

⁶³ Romans 3 Vulgate.

⁶⁴ Romans 10 :1-4.

⁶⁵ Romans 10 Vulgate.

But I say: Have they not heard? Yes, verily, *their sound hath gone forth into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the whole world.*

But I say: Hath not Israel not known? First, Moses saith: *I will provoke you to jealousy by that which is not a nation; by a foolish nation I will anger you.*

But Isaias is bold, and saith: *I was found by them that did not seek me: I appeared openly to them that asked not after me.*

But to Israel he saith: *All the day long have I spread my hands to a people that believeth not, and contradicteth me.*⁶⁶

The chapter description for Romans 11 then reads “God hath not cast off all Israel. The gentiles must not be proud; but stand in faith and fear.”⁶⁷ With the inclusion of Romans, Cusa’s earlier point about faith gleaming by way of true knowledge and resonating by means of confession suggests that this is not something the Jews have, but that they are not to be entirely cast off as they can come to know the path towards salvation. It is a paternalistic view, which expects that Jews will eventually come to salvation once they submit to the truth of Christ in their hearts. It is as if to say, ‘we Christians know that your way is incorrect because it does not resemble us. We will wait for you to remove the blinders of your incomplete belief and see our truth.’ This comes centuries after the massacres and forced conversions of Jews during the first Crusades of the Middle Ages and as Jeremy Cohen has developed, by the time of Cusa and Nicholas V it had been an informal papal policy to affirm and re-affirm the right of Jews to exist as Jews within the boundaries of Christian kingdoms without the fear of massacres and forced conversions looming over them.⁶⁸ It is also reflective of the split view of ‘the Jews’ as a contemporary people and ‘the Jews’ as a hermeneutical construction in the Catholic understanding. By this point in late medieval Christian theology, Jews were defined by Saint

⁶⁶ Romans 10: 16-21, Vulgate.

⁶⁷ Romans 11, Vulgate.

⁶⁸ Jeremy Cohen, “Christian Theology and Anti-Jewish Violence: Connections and Disjunctions” in *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan (London: 2000) 45-6. The right of Jews to exist as Jews refers to the papal bull *Sicut Iudeis*, which granted the protection of existing synagogues and graveyards, as well as prohibiting forced conversion. It was first issued in 1120, and reissued for the next three centuries with Nicholas V reissuing it for the last time in 1447.

Augustine's theory of Jewish witness of not only the crucifixion of Christ but as Jeremy Cohen aptly describes "living letters of the law."⁶⁹ This is to say, Jews served as a collective symbol for Christian theologians of the Old Testament and as representative of what Christians were not; adherents of the old law and keepers of a covenant that no longer existed by the Christian interpretation of the New Testament. While still inflammatory in rhetoric and a cause for outbursts of anti-Jewish violence, the hermeneutical construction of the Jew in the theological mind of the Christian played an important role in the maintenance of the Christian faith. The hermeneutical Jew served institutional Christianity as it could provide literal and tangible evidence of Christianity's truths for the lay person, but it also provided a counter identity for the German Christian to understand himself. The German Christian accepts Jesus Christ as the Messiah and accepts the truth of his death and resurrection: the German Jew does not. The German Christian has accepted not only the works of the law, but also the grace of Christ: the German Jew does not. However, with the attempt on the part of Nicholas of Cusa to betroth the German Jews to the saving grace of Christ via the *Judenring* as Israel had been in the Prophecy of Hosea, they too can be saved or at least shown the path into the fold of Christianity.

With Cusa's theological arguments deconstructed, the symbolic purpose of the *Judenring* badge that he attempted to impose can be better understood as a symbol of betrothal, and specifically the betrothal of Jews to the Christian conception of God and faith. While the badge itself was not invented whole cloth by Cusa, his vision for the symbolism that such an object could be imbued with was indeed unique. Much like how the betrothal of Israel to God in Hosea 2 functions as a means of ridding her of her spiritual and physical improprieties, the ring badge for Cusa was a religious symbol that he imposed with the thought that it would betroth the Jews to faithfulness and belief in the Christian way, and particularly in the Christian

⁶⁹ Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*. University of California Press (Berkeley: 1999)

theological understanding of ‘the Jew’. This is perhaps also why the ordinances for the badge in 1451 and 1452 are accompanied by restrictions on usury. Although in reality Christians also practiced usury amongst themselves, so-called Jewish usury was seen by some as a greater evil for Christians to participate in as patrons because it appeared not to dissuade the Jews from ‘un-Christian’ activities but to solidify the demand, and therefore to give tacit permission to continue usury. The interpretations of scripture made by Cusa are not unlike those of many of his contemporaries like Stephan Bodecker, who was the bishop of Brandenburg during Cusa’s time as papal legate. Bodecker went further than Cusa in some respects and argued that the persecution of Jews at the time was actually divine retribution for Jewish resistance to the truth of Christianity.⁷⁰

Cusa’s ring preceded a unique period of publicization of German Jewish converts to Christianity, most notably of former “rabbi” Victor von Carben in 1476 and later Johannes Pfefferkorn in 1505.⁷¹ Jewish conversion to Christianity at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century had grown, though the number of converts remained very small over the course of the next few centuries.⁷² After the conversions of von Carben and Pfefferkorn, both men went on to publish books that claimed to reveal “the secrets of the Jews” in which they leveraged their status as former Jews with inside knowledge of so-called Jewish attacks on Christianity from a theological and ideological standpoint.⁷³ Because of their conversion to Christianity, neither von Carben nor Pfefferkorn would have been required to wear the

⁷⁰ Christopher Ocker, “German Theologians and the Jews in the Fifteenth Century” in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Brill (Leiden: 2006) 65.

⁷¹ Maria Diemling, “Patronage, Representation, and Conversion: Victor von Carben (1423-1515) and his Social Networks” in *Revealing the Secrets of the Jews: Johannes Pfefferkorn and Christian Writings about Jewish Life and Literature in Early Modern Europe*. De Gruyter (Berlin: 2017). The word rabbi has been put in quotations to reflect the claim made by von Carben that he had been a rabbi prior to his conversion, though historians have not been able to confirm this claim as fact.

⁷² Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls – Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1700*. Yale University Press (New Haven: 2008) 47.

⁷³ Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß, “Jewish Life and Books under Scrutiny: Ethnography, Polemics, and Converts” in *Revealing the Secrets of the Jews: Johannes Pfefferkorn and Christian Writings about Jewish Life and Literature in Early Modern Europe*. De Gruyter (Berlin: 2017), 4.

Judenring when it had been required locally or across the empire after 1530. Both men had been betrothed by their new faith and had abandoned the errant ways of their former faith, and so the ring was not needed for their salvation was seen as achieved. Pfefferkorn became a notorious figure amongst Christian Hebraists in the 16th century and he came into conflict with Catholic scholar Johann Reuchlin, who advocated against the confiscation of the Talmud from Jewish communities while Pfefferkorn preached for the destruction of Jewish books. In the pamphleteering battle between Reuchlin and Pfefferkorn on the matter in 1516, associates of Reuchlin printed broadsheets of Pfefferkorn that depicted him wearing a *Judenring* despite his converted status.⁷⁴ In this respect, the *Judenring* was employed as a negative symbol that denoted Pfefferkorn's supposed disloyalty to the Catholic faith and his indelible nature as a Jewish man, a symbol intended to harm his reputation as a devout Catholic and a preacher against Judaism.

The Peace of Faith

By contrast to his earlier sermon, one of Cusa's most well-known treatises, *The Peace of Faith*, is notable for its development of some of Cusa's previous mystical and symbolist ideas in a Catholic context but also for its treatment of Judaism and Islam in dialogue with the Christian faith. Cusa wrote the treatise in September of 1453, just after the Byzantine capital Constantinople had fallen to Ottoman forces in May of that year. It marked the end of the Roman empire, and it also saw the Ottomans consolidate a strategically important position at the geographic gateway to continental Europe. The Catholic Church felt the pressure of not only an ambitious Ottoman Empire in the east but of the growing institutional decay in the west. Cusa, inspired by Constantinople and perhaps also by his time as papal legate which had

⁷⁴ Franz Poset, "In Search of the Historical Pfefferkorn: The Missionary to the Jews, 1507-1508" in *Revealing the Secrets of the Jews: Johannes Pfefferkorn and Christian Writings about Jewish Life and Literature in Early Modern Europe*. De Gruyter (Berlin: 2017) 46.

concluded that same year, wrote *The Peace of Faith* primarily in the form of a discussion on faith between multiple people: a Greek; an Italian; an Arab; an Indian; a Chaldean; a Persian; a Frenchman; a Scythian; a Syrian; a Turk; a Spaniard; a German; a Tatar; a Jew; an Armenian; a Bohemian; and an Englishman. The religion of each man is not identified, though each of them take turns discussing Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Their discussion also involves speaking with Saint Peter and Saint Paul, as well as with the Holy Word itself. Early in the treatise before the conversation between all the participants begins, Cusa writes the following in the voice of The Word (sometimes referred to as His Word) after the Supreme King orders “wayward man” to return:

Father of Mercies, Your works are most perfect, and there remains nothing to be added for their completion. Nevertheless, because You decreed from the beginning that man remain in possession of free choice, and since in the sensible world nothing remains stable, and since fluxible opinions and conjectures are changed from time to time, as are also tongues and interpretations, human nature needs frequent visitation in order that the false inferences which occur very often concerning Your Word may be eradicated and thereby truth may continually shine forth. Since truth is one and since it cannot fail to be grasped by every free intellect, all the diverse religions will be led unto one orthodox faith.⁷⁵

Here, Cusa offered a much different perspective and tone on the existence of multiple religions than he had in his previous written works and sermons. Where he had previously railed against other religions and spoken of the need for their ‘extirpation by fire and sword’, we now see him write that the diverse rituals of the different Abrahamic religions lead into one unified faith. This view is far more generous and almost pluralistic in thought when compared to his previous statements. *The Peace of Faith* continues with each of the seventeen men, now tasked with finding a way to settle and reduce their religious differences into “one inviolable

⁷⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 636.

religion”, bringing their doubts on the matter to the personification of God’s Word.⁷⁶ They learn that they have been brought together as the wise men of their respective language groups, though they are initially doubtful in the premise put forward by the Word that the diversity of their faiths can be harmoniously unified into a single religion. However, the more that the men speak with the Word and eventually with the apostles Peter and Paul, they come to realize the commonality of their belief in spite of the diversity of ritual. Cusa’s work ends with each wise man returning to his people to lead the masses into this singular, unified religion, after which the men meet each other again in Jerusalem as the common centre of their religions and “in the names of all [their countrymen] accept a single faith and establish a perpetual peace with respect thereto, so that the Creator of all, who is blessed forever, may be praised in peace.”⁷⁷ This ‘single faith’ is not explicitly named to be Christianity, however several interactions between the wise men and the Word or Peter and Paul do in fact make the reader aware that Christ is still “the Word of God” and thus that the non-Christian wise men “must confess that Christ is God.”⁷⁸ In the text, Peter acknowledges that “The sect of the Arabs, which is large, still confesses that Christ resurrected the dead and created birds from clay; and there are many other things which they expressly confess Jesus Christ (as being the one who had power) to have done.”⁷⁹ It is clear still that this ‘unified religion’ that Cusa theorized is still based on the fundamentals of Christian belief, he wrote the Muslim wise men in such a way that they accept the existence of Christian fundamentals within Islam and as such they accept the universality of Christianity. His inclusion of Judaism is handled differently however, when the Persian wise man asks Peter about the Jews and their lack of belief in Christ:

⁷⁶ Ibid, 637.

⁷⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 670.

⁷⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 649.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 654.

Persian: The Arabs affirm of Christ these and many [other] things, which are written in the Koran. However, to bring the Jews to believe any of this will be more difficult than [to bring] others, since the Jews do not expressly admit anything regarding Christ. *Peter:* In their Scriptures they have all these [teachings] regarding Christ; but they follow the literal meaning and refuse to understand. However, this resistance of the Jews will not impede harmony, for [the Jews] are few in number and will not be able to trouble the whole world by force of arms.⁸⁰

This would seem to indicate a concession to the Jews on the part of Peter or Cusa writing as Peter. He cannot seem to bridge the gap between the contemporary Jews and Christ, at least as Christ is understood to Christianity. Not long after the Persian wise man discussed his worry with Peter, the Tatar raised his own concerns to Paul:

Tatar: ... The numerous and simple Tatars, who worship one God as best they know how, are amazed at the variety of rites on the part of others who also worship the same God with them. For example, [the Tatars] deride the fact that certain Christians (and all Arabs and Jews) are circumcised, that some [worshippers] are marked on their faces with brandings, and that others are baptized... I do not understand how a unity can result with respect to these [different practices] ... But unless it does result, persecution will not cease; for diversity begets divisiveness and enmity, animosities and wars.

Paul: It is necessary to show that salvation of the soul results not from works but from faith. (For Abraham, the Father-of-faith for all believers – whether Christians or Arabs or Jews – believed God, and [this faith] was imputed to him as justice. And the soul of the just man will inherit eternal life.) Once this [fact] is admitted, the varieties of rites will not be disturbing, for they were instituted and received as perceptible signs of true faith. Now, the signs [themselves] admit of change, though the signified object does not.⁸¹

In an interesting turn, Cusa by way of Paul applied a semiotic manner of thinking to the rituals of the religious other. Instead of his early career statements in which he expounded one single

⁸⁰ Ibid, 654.

⁸¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 662.

faith to be represented and exercised through one manner of rituals and rites, Cusa wrote in his treatise that all Abrahamic rites were “instituted and received as perceptible signs of true faith”. In essence, though he believed still that Christian rites and rituals were ultimately the most current and pleasing to God, he now admitted that because these other rites of Jews and Muslims still are signs of their faith, despite that the signs “admit of change” or are visually different from Christian rites. The signified object, their faith, does not change.

The topic of the Jews is dropped at this point in the text, taken up only briefly in discussion of Christ’s death (where Peter reasserts the idea that the Jews killed Christ as historical fact) and in discussion of the afterlife and eternal life, in which Peter states that “the happiness that they [the Jews] expect is expected by them not on the basis of the works of the law (for their laws do not promise happiness) but on the basis of a faith which presupposes Christ, as was said earlier.”⁸² He acknowledges the faith the Jews have in following their law, which is still seen as a positive aspect though Jews are chided throughout the text for their ‘ignorance’ of the full (and Christian) truth of Jesus as messiah. The patience which Cusa gave to the wise men who represented Islam in his text was not necessarily extended to Judaism, though this could perhaps reflect a desire to address Muslim Turks in the immediacy of the Ottoman capture of Constantinople and the perceived encroachment of Islam that Catholic officials felt, now coming from the east. Even in Cusa’s later work, the Jews were still on the borders of the faith as they had been in Cusa’s real life.

However, the storyline of Cusa’s treatise was not the first time some of these themes of unity of the three Abrahamic religions would appear in written works during the late Middle Ages and early modern period. The inclusion of similar interfaith dialogues in the form of disputations had been a common occurrence since approximately the 12th century, though

⁸² Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 661.

varying in their moral lessons and conclusions.⁸³ Chroniclers from around Europe had been including a moral parable that featured three wise men rather than seventeen, and who each questioned the truth of faith if there was to be only one ‘true’ faith overall. While the exact inspiration for Cusa’s treatise is not known, older stories that were popular with the public and with similar themes as *Peace of Faith* also circulated during his time. These stories used similar narrative points but were more developed in the symbolism that was incorporated into their structure, making particular use of ring motifs. This will not be the last appearance of this theme, as will be discussed further in the second chapter.

Badges After Cusa

Though Nicholas V did rescind the ordinances issued by Cusa, he did not rescind or counter the rationale used to justify their creation in the first place. He stated that the usurious behaviour of the Jews was wicked, but that Christians are reminded by their faith to not eliminate Jews entirely from the borders of Christianity, and ultimately in the hope of their salvation. In this sense, Nicholas V assumes a similar view to his distant predecessor Honorius III in his rejection of the need for a Jewish badge. However, both Cusa and Nicholas V employed Augustinian thinking to the matter of the Jewish badge. While both see Jewish marking as a necessary part of their Biblicist understanding of the Christian religion, the limit upon this practice is not given in the Bible. Innocent III did not give many precise notes on how far this marking was supposed to extend, or if there were exemptions that could be granted to individuals or entire communities, as would happen much later on. Even as the 15th century ended, the implementation of the badge as a broad ordinance across the empire was still not any closer to becoming reality for the Christian authorities who desired it and was unlikely to

⁸³ Brian Catlos and Alex Novikoff, “Interfaith Dialogue and Disputation in the Medieval Mediterranean” in *Medieval Encounters*. Brill (Leiden: 2018) 505-6.

happen by religious measures alone. German Jews also fought back against the ordinances, whether proposed or officially decreed. In a letter to the Frankfurt city council in 1460, the Jews of Frankfurt wrote their arguments against the implementation of the badge, which had again been proposed by Archbishop Diether of Mainz.⁸⁴ After Cusa's death in 1464, local attempts at passing badge ordinances were put into effect until 1530, with Martin Luther remarking in his journal after a visit to Frankfurt in 1521 that every Jew in the city wore their yellow rings.⁸⁵ However, adherence to these localised ordinances was inconsistent until the matter was taken up at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. The Diet itself came as a result of turmoil within Christianity and political unrest, as Martin Luther rose to prominence in 1517 for his 95 theses criticizing the practices and corruption of the Catholic Church. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther and the Reformation movement were roundly condemned.

The Diet of Augsburg saw the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in June of 1530, which set forth the confession of faith of the Lutheran Church. It also saw the initial presentation of the *Code Carolina Criminalis* (Polizeiordnung) several months later in November, which was considered the first empire-wide written legal code. It covered a variety of matters that were considered most pressing at the time, including witchcraft, dress codes, and usury. With one of the primary goals of the Diet being the political and social reinforcement of the empire against the advancing Ottomans, who had unsuccessfully attempted to invade Vienna in 1529, the Polizeiordnung attempted to regulate the behaviours and attitudes of all inhabitants. Section 22 of the Code included the following prescription for Jews:

On Jewish Clothing

⁸⁴ Schreiben der Judenschaft an den Rat betr. die Vorschriften über des Erzbischofs Diether von Mainz über das Tragen eines Judenzeichens. Entwurf. 1460-1461. H.17.08, 731, Institut für Stadt Geschichte Frankfurt am Main (ISG FFM).

⁸⁵ Carl von Heister: Geschichtliche Untersuchungen über Israel. 3, Die Juden: aufgebürdete Verbrechen. Erlittene Verfolgung. Angethane Schmach. W. F. Tauer Schmidt (Naumburg: 1863) 107. Translation is my own.

1. Likewise, Jews are to wear a yellow ring on their coats or caps everywhere, openly and publicly, for their recognition.
2. And so that this statute and order concerning excessive disorderly clothing and petty attire may be more firmly maintained and enforced, we hereby solemnly command all electors, princes, prelates, counts, freemen, lords, knights, servants, bailiffs, mayors, judges, and councillors, and require them to strictly observe this order for themselves and to strictly enforce it against their subjects. If anyone violates or offends against this, every authority shall punish them, in addition to the loss of the clothing or petty attire worn contrary to this order, with a fine equal to twice the value of the clothing or petty attire to the civil authority of the place. And whether some authority is found to be negligent and careless in its punishment and administration, and whether our Fiscal shall proceed and execute the above-mentioned penalties and punishments against such negligent authority, as well as against the overstepping subjects.⁸⁶

As this was issued by imperial authorities rather than from papal authorities, the differences in the language between the two are immediately apparent. While Cusa's ordinance included punishment of both Jews and Christians with the immediate threat of excommunication of the local diocese, the immediate threat in the Augsburg ordinance is primarily placed on the Jews. The punishment outlined in Cusa's ordinance was directed towards the spiritual life and privileges of city residents, impacting their ability to participate in Christian festivals and holidays in the way the residents of surrounding areas would have enjoyed. Implicitly, it was understood that the failure to adhere to the *Judenring* regulation was first on the Jews but secondly on the Christians for allowing the transgression at all. The Augsburg regulation did not include references to the sacred canons of the Fourth Lateran Council and excluded general biblical or theological references entirely. The matter was now

⁸⁶“Von der Juden Kleidung” in Neue und vollständigere Sammlung der Reichs-Abschiede, Welche von den Zeiten Kayser Conrads des II. bis jetzo, auf den Teutschen Reichs-Tägen abgefasst worden, 1747. VD18 90516036. Universitäts und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle. Translation is my own.

considered a criminal issue to be handled by the secular imperial authorities, though not entirely removed from its religious roots.

From Cusa and Catholic policy to Protestant reformers and ‘secular’ regulations

After the initial proposal of the Code at Augsburg and the imperial approval along with the official implementation two years later in 1532 at Regensburg, the inclusion of the *Judenring* regulation in local *Judenordnungen* (Jewish ordinances) began to appear much faster than previous attempts. The Frankfurt city council in particular drafted several copies of the *Judenring* and the accompanying text in 1541 as shown in figure 5.



Figure 19: Konzept der Ratsverordnung, daß alle Juden einen gelben Ring tragen sollen, vom 18. August 1541. Mit farbiger Zeichnung des Ringes. The two draft copies of the *Judenring* drawn up by Frankfurt city council from August 18, 1541. ISG FFM, H.17.08, 502. Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main.

Of particular interest with these drafts is the second, which shows a *Judenring* with what appear to be hairs or fibres. It is likely that this version of the ring was intended to be a wreath, though the material with which it would have been made from was not specified in the accompanying ordinance text. This second version of the badge was not used for the official badge, which was made from a flat felt or cloth. Just as with rings, wreaths were also used as symbols of unity and betrothal in the Christian Biblicist understanding. In his notorious treatise *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen* (On the Jews and Their Lies) from 1543, Martin Luther makes several allusions to wreaths as symbols of betrothal. He used the first two chapters of the Prophecy of Hosea in order to argue that in spite of the betrothal of Israel to God, and in spite

of any symbols of this betrothal, the union of Israel and her descendants to God was in fact broken and irreparable.

For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence that they assuredly have erred and gone astray. Even a child can comprehend this. For one dare not regard God as so cruel that he would punish his own people so long, so terribly, so unmercifully, and in addition keep silent, comforting them neither with words nor with deeds, and fixing no time limit and no end to it. Who would have faith, hope, or love toward such a God? Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God. This is in accord with Hosea 1:9, "Call his name Not my people, for you are not my people and I am not your God." Yes, unfortunately, this is their lot, truly a terrible one. They may interpret this as they will; we see the facts before our eyes, and these do not deceive us.⁸⁷

Here, Luther made use of Hosea 1 in which the prophet Hosea is commanded to marry an unfaithful woman named Gomer. This is an allusion to the relationship between God and wayward Israel, which was further detailed in Hosea 2 and also referred to by Cusa. Luther continued from Hosea 1 and wrote the following on the assertion that the Jewish people were God's chosen people in the Old Testament, in directly referencing the story of Hosea 2:

They [Jews] relate that the chiefs of the people wore wreaths at Mount Sinai at that time as a symbol that they had contracted a marriage with God through the law, that they had become his bride, and that the two had wedded one another. Later we read in all the prophets how God appears and talks with the children of Israel as a husband with his wife...

Now we challenge you, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the prophets, and whoever will, to come and to be bold enough to say that such a noble nation with whom God himself converses and with whom he enters into marriage through the law, and to whom he joins himself as to a bride, is not God's people... it became apparent that they [Jews]

⁸⁷ Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen*, 1543. Translated by Martin H. Bertram in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society IV*. Fortress Press (Philadelphia: 1971) 138-39.

were a defiled bride, yes, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut with whom God ever had to wrangle, scuffle, and fight.⁸⁸

Luther's rhetoric was hinged primarily on the reading of the Prophecy of Hosea as taking place between God and Israel personified where Israel represented the Israelites and their descendants. Though both made use of Hosea to bolster the Christian faith as being the true and most virtuous faith, Cusa left open the possibility for those on the borders of Christianity to be received into the fold or at least tolerated if voluntary behaviours like usury ceased. A later passage from Luther in which he again alludes to the betrothal imagery of Hosea makes it evident that he did not necessarily believe that to be possible:

Or let us suppose that somewhere a pretty girl came along, adorned with a wreath, and observed all the manners, the duties, the deportment and discipline of a chaste virgin, but underneath was a vile, shameful whore, violating the Ten Commandments. What good would her fine obedience in observing outwardly all the duties and customs of a virgin's station do her? It would do her this much – that one would be seven times more hostile to her than to an impudent, public whore. Thus God constantly chided the children of Israel through the prophets, calling them a vile whore because, under the guise and decor of external laws and sanctity, they practiced all sorts of idolatry and villainy, as especially Hosea laments in chapter 2.⁸⁹

Luther's commentary was far more aggressive in rhetoric than Cusa's, and also championed a sort of predeterminism that is inescapable. He read Hosea 2 not with the idea of redemption in union with the Lord, as Cusa and Nicholas V once had, but instead he took the chapter as evidence that even with the adoption of correct behaviour and external obedience, it will not rectify the villainy within. With this, there is a marked divergence from the careful toleration in hopes of unification that was expressed by Cusa in the 15th century. Luther's book, which was printed in German and widely disseminated during the latter half of the 16th century,

⁸⁸ Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen*, 1543. Translated by Martin H. Bertram in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society IV*. Fortress Press (Philadelphia: 1971) 165-66.

⁸⁹ Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen*, 1543. Translated by Martin H. Bertram in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society IV*. Fortress Press (Philadelphia: 1971) 170.

provided some of the accelerant needed for the exponential increase in anti-Jewish action and sentiment from the Reformation and into the 17th century.

The introduction to Luther's translated works also noted this divergence. Martin Bertram remarked that Luther had previously maintained views that had been more popular during Cusa's time, namely the idea that contemporary Jews needed to be gently and patiently guided towards the correct interpretation of their own scriptures and through this process, the veil of ignorance would be lifted from their eyes, and they would convert to Christianity.⁹⁰ Again similar to how Hosea 2 was interpreted at this time, the reformers of Cusa's era and early on in Luther's era had seemingly tried to employ their more Neo-Platonist interpretations in their reality, but upon a group who desired their own autonomy and did not interpret scripture in the same fashion. The idealistic view that large numbers of Jews would convert to Christianity did not come to fruition, even as attempts by reformers and the empire itself through ordinances and regulations tried to create a uniform front in the form of a neatly defined Christian society. The visual significance of the *Judenring* badge was now on the precipice of major reimagining in the public conscience. The printed images of the 16th century enabled more of the commonfolk to share their imagined and reimagined ideas about the Jews, and in a format that was better suited for widespread distribution. The refined writings of theologians both Catholic and Protestant detailed the lines of argumentation against the Jews, but popular stories and printed images carried these arguments even further, developing and reinforcing the *Judenring* not as a sign of faithfulness or proposed faith but of insolence towards Christianity.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 126.

Chapter 2: Printing the Jew

*There was another cause yet more deeply seated... it was the tendency to see everything in the concrete, to turn the parable into a fact.*⁹¹

There was once a man with three sons, each exactly alike in goodness and virtue. The man also possessed a beautiful gold ring, which illuminated the wearer in the eyes of God. Each son had separately been promised the ring as inheritance, but the man could not decide to which of his sons he should bestow his gift. To solve his dilemma, the man had two copies of his ring made and they mirrored the original in every way. He gave one to each of his sons, with none of them knowing who had the true ring. The knowledge of who held the original ring was now known only by God.

This narrative skeleton is known as the parable of the three rings, or *Ringsparable* in German. While the specifics of the text changed significantly between numerous translations and printings over the course of centuries, the medieval and early modern iterations of the story broadly maintain the same narrative structure and characters: a higher figure is in possession of a beautiful and powerful ring, each of his three dependents vie for possession. In later medieval retellings, the competition between the three dependents features more prominently as each sought to prove their worthiness as the sole owner of the ring. Beginning in at least the High Middle Ages, this parable was included in numerous didactic story collections and preachers' manuals. Depending on the collection the parable appeared in, the ending of the story tended to change according to the purpose of the larger story collection, as will be discussed later in this chapter. It continued to be shared and eventually printed in Latin well into the Late Middle Ages and the early modern period, with German translations gaining significant popularity. For the purpose of this study, the two major publications of the parable

⁹¹ James Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire*. MacMillan and Co. (London: 1871) 95.

that will be examined are the *Gesta Romanorum* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Both texts were first written and collected in the 14th century with Boccaccio's work being written primarily because of the plague outbreak in the midcentury, which is itself part of the overarching storyline.⁹² Details surrounding the origins of the *Gesta Romanorum* are more mysterious though, as no author has been identified and the exact or even approximate date of its creation has never been ascertained.⁹³ However, elements of the parable in both collections can be seen in Nicholas of Cusa's 15th century writings, particularly the ring motif with Cusa's sermon from 1431 and the desire to know a 'true' heir with *Peace of Faith*. Especially in the 16th century these texts would have been more accessible to the general public in places like Frankfurt, as the city was home to the largest book fair in the empire and also located close by the town of Mainz, which boasted the invention of Johannes Gutenberg's moveable type as well as a major printing press. The Frankfurt book fair had been celebrated since at least the 13th century, receiving imperial protection from Frederick II in 1240.⁹⁴ Analyzing this parable and the extent of its inclusion in written collected volumes that were widely printed serves two purposes. The first being that the parable, along with the story it is framed by, was another way in which Jews were presented to the Christian public. As a result, we can contrast characterizations of Jews in popular literature with depictions present in theological works like sermons and treatises. Additionally, we are able to see the changes in the use of the ring as a motif between popular literature and theological works.

In returning to the parable, it presented an interesting statement on faith, tolerance and the Abrahamic religions while using rings as metaphors or similes, much like Cusa's 1431 sermon. However, in the centuries after authors included the parable in their written works, the

⁹² Iris Shagrir, "Boccaccio's Decameron: Inspiration and Influence" in *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2019) 94.

⁹³ Iris Shagrir, "Gesta Romanorum" in *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2019) 81.

⁹⁴ Mathilde Rovelstad, "The Frankfurt Book Fair" in *The Journal of Library History*. University of Texas Press (Austin: 1972) 116.

parable underwent significant modifications and later censorship that would ultimately change the moral almost entirely. These changes reflected not only the time that had passed since the initial writing and the inevitability that small details would be lost or altered, but also the change in attitude towards the moral of the story itself by way of how the ring is used in the story. Much like how we can see a change in rhetoric regarding Jews and metaphorical rings from Nicholas of Cusa to Martin Luther, a similar evolution can be traced through the way Jews and rings are employed in printed literary collections featuring the parable and in later printed images.

Gesta Romanorum

The oldest known copy of the *Gesta* dates to 1342 in Austria and is speculated to have originally been the work of an English or German author/s, as the majority of the surviving copies are in either language.⁹⁵ In the preface to his 1879 early English translations of the collection, historian and editor Sidney J. H. Herrtage wrote “Perhaps there is no work among those composed before the invention of the printing, of which the popularity has been so great and the history so obscure, as the compilation known under the title of the *Gesta Romanorum*.”⁹⁶ According to Herman Österley’s 1872 Latin edition of the *Gesta*, he stated in his introduction that one of the first known printings of the *Gesta* in German was at Augsburg in 1489.⁹⁷ In spite of the *Gesta*’s obscure origins, the collection of allegories and parables was written in such a way that intended for the stories to be shared by and with many. Many of the stories are short, some are only a paragraph or two long, and are accompanied by equally short explanations (“applications”) of the symbols and themes in each text. The format of the text

⁹⁵ Albrecht Classen, “The *Gesta Romanorum*: A Sammelbecken of Ancient Wisdom and Didactic Literature and a Medieval ‘Bestseller’ Revisited” in *Literature and Aesthetics*. University of Sydney (Sydney: 2017) 74-75.

⁹⁶ Sidney J. H. Herrtage, *Early English versions of the Gesta Romanorum*. N. Trübner & Co. (London: 1879) vii.

⁹⁷ Hermann Österley, *Gesta Romanorum*. Weidmannsche (Berlin: 1872) 1.

supports the assertions by literary scholars and historians that the *Gesta* was intended for use as a preacher's manual, providing the medieval preacher with interesting and easily digestible moral tales with important messages gleaned from the Bible woven in. As Nigel Harris wrote in his introduction to a 2016 English translation of the *Gesta* by Christopher Stace,

From the time of the Church Fathers onwards, scholars perceived in the Bible both a literal sense, a *sensus literalis*, and a spiritual sense, a *sensus spiritualis*; and the convention developed of dividing this spiritual sense into three levels, or layers. These consisted of the allegorical, concerned with the history of salvation, the tropological, which focuses on moral instruction for this life, and finally the anagogical, which relates to the end times and, as such, to heaven.⁹⁸

For the interpretation of the *Gesta* and the relevancy of the parable of the three rings to the *Judenring* as a symbol, the three layers of the 'spiritual sense' are an important key to making sense of the relationship between physical reality and spiritual understanding. The parable of the three rings can be understood in a literal sense as a story about inheritance, but it can also be understood as a commentary on the worthiness of faith. With this in mind, the parable of the three rings appears in the *Gesta* as the 89th story in the collection titled "On the Triple State of the World". The text from the 1905 English translation, followed by the application text, reads as follows:

A certain knight had three sons, and on his deathbed he bequeathed the inheritance to his first-born; to the second, his treasury; and to the third, a very valuable ring, of more worth indeed than all he had left to the others. But the two former had also rings; and they were all apparently the same. After their father's death the first son said, "I possess that precious ring of my father." The second said, "You have it not—I have." To this the third son answered, "That is not true. The elder of us hath the estate, the second the treasure, and therefore it is but meet[sic] that I should have the most valuable ring." The first son answered, "Let us prove, then, whose claims to it have the pre-eminence."

⁹⁸ Nigel Harris and Christopher Stace, "*Gesta Romanorum*". *A New Translation by Christopher Stace with an Introduction by Nigel Harris*. Manchester University Press (Manchester: 2016) 6.

They agreed, and several sick men were made to resort to them for the purpose. The two first rings had no effect, but the last cured all their infirmities.

APPLICATION: My beloved, the knight is Christ: the three sons are the Jews, Saracens, and Christians. The most valuable ring is faith, which is the property only of the younger; that is, of the Christians.⁹⁹

In Herman Österley's German translation of the *Gesta* from 1872, the application text was expanded to include the following:

Dearest ones, the knight is our Lord Jesus Christ, who has three sons, namely Jews, Saracens, and Christians. To the Jews he gave the promised land, to the Saracens, the treasure of this world, both in respect to power and riches, and to the Christians he gave the precious ring, namely faith, for through faith Christians are able to cure diseases and infirmities of the spirit: as it is written, all things are possible to those who believe. Item: "If you have faith just as a mustard seed, etc." Item: "It is impossible to please God without faith."¹⁰⁰

The knight gave both the Jews and Muslims earthly, temporal gifts alongside the beautiful yet functionally useless rings while granting his Christian son the sole precious ring. From this particular piece of the application, there are direct parallels to be drawn with Nicolas of Cusa and *On the Peace of Faith*. When the German wise man discussed with Saint Peter what each Abrahamic faith is promised, he stated that "For to the Jews are promised, in accordance with their law, only temporal things, which consist of sensible goods. But to the Arabs... are promised only bodily [goods] – though everlasting ones. By contrast, the Gospel promises angelic-likeness, i.e., that men will be like angels, who have nothing bodily."¹⁰¹ He continues

⁹⁹ Rev. Charles Swan, *Gesta Romanorum*. George Bell & Sons (London: 1905) 211.

¹⁰⁰ Hermann Österley, *Gesta Romanorum*. Weidmannsche (Berlin: 1872) 417. Translation by John D. Martin, *Representations of Jews in Late Medieval and Early Modern German Literature*. Peter Lang AG (Bern: 2004) 235.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 660.

shortly after that “All things temporal wane; only intellectual things never do so... knowing and understanding and beholding the truth with the mind’s eye are always pleasant.”¹⁰² All of this, both the *Gesta* application of the parable and Cusa’s own writing on the temporal gifts and desires of Jews, implies that the true nature of faith is known to Christians through not only rites and rituals but also the nature of their belief in Christ. It also resembles Martin Luther’s later commentary from 1543, though where Luther differed from Cusa and the *Gesta* is in the conclusions they drew. While Cusa and the *Gesta* were more open to the possibility of unity by way of ushering non-believers into the fold, Luther argued a static and unchangeable model in his metaphor of the pretty girl wearing a wreath; the signs of faith in the form of her wreath are there, but the supposed unchangeable nature of her inner self is what prevents her from becoming virtuous and saved.

However, the gift of the true ring in the *Gesta* was far more detailed in its use as a symbol of faith than Luther’s wreath. The true ring itself has purpose; it allows for the owner to perform the miracle of healing the sick in the same way Jesus was believed to have done. With the knight representing Jesus, the gifting of the ring to the Christian son also denotes a passing of ability to Christians more broadly. This is to say that not only is there faith to be found in adherence to religious law, but also in the acts of the faithful. While the Jewish and Muslim sons are also given rings that look identical to their Christian brother, they are ultimately useless as they do not have true faith. The certainty of the conclusion, that the ring could only belong to the Christian son, will evolve over the different printings and retellings of the parable over time, as will be shown with Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

The Decameron

¹⁰² Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*. Translation by Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribatio Alkorani*. Arthur J. Banning Press (Minneapolis: 1994) 660.

The origins of the *Decameron* are much more well-known compared to the *Gesta*, owing in part to Boccaccio's previous works and affiliation with Dante Alighieri. Giovanni Boccaccio is credited as the sole author, though his inspirations for the stories in his collection are well-known and there exists far more secondary literature on the form and message of the collection than of the *Gesta*. One of the earliest known German translations of the *Decameron* was done in 1476 produced by Arrigho di Federigho della Magna, who was a Florence-born civil servant in Nuremberg.¹⁰³ The frame narrative of the *Decameron* takes place over ten days in quarantine during the black plague of 1348-50, as a group of ten friends tell one story each over the course of their ten days together. Boccaccio wrote his collection during this same period, which made the stories more salient for their sense of currency. On the first day of the series, the third story of the day told by Filomena called "Melchizedek the Jew, with a story about three rings, avoids a most dangerous trap laid for him by Saladin" and it is here that the parable of the three rings is told as part of a larger story between the two named characters, Melchizedek and Saladin. The story in the *Decameron* is much longer and more developed than in the *Gesta*, partially as a result of the overarching narrative of the *Decameron* itself.

In Filomena's story, Saladin is the Sultan of Egypt and is in serious financial need after spending all of his money funding various wars and excursions. He decides to seek out a loan from Melchizedek, a Jewish moneylender, but Melchizedek is known for being conservative with his loans and will not loan money to just anybody. Saladin decides that he will trick Melchizedek into providing him a loan by asking the moneylender an impossible question, and upon his failure to answer correctly and the humiliation he would feel, he would then feel obligated to loan Saladin the money. When Melchizedek arrives to meet him, Saladin asks the following question:

¹⁰³ Achim Aurnhammer, "Boccaccios Ringsparabel im frühneuzeitlichen Deutschland (1476 bis 1608) in *Die drei Ringe: Entstehung, Wandel und Wirkung der Ringparabel in der europäischen Literatur und Kultur*. De Gruyter (Berlin: 2016) 114.

O man of excellent worth, many men have told me of your great wisdom and your superior knowledge of the ways of God. Hence I would be glad if you would tell me which of the three laws, whether the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian, you deem to be truly authentic.¹⁰⁴

Here, Saladin introduces the main problematic of the parable by asking Melchizedek for the answer unburdened by any metaphor or allegory. However, the way Melchizedek responds to the question is where the structure of the parable is introduced, and in a much longer and more detailed format than found in the *Gesta*. In Melchizedek's telling of the parable, a father of three sons is in possession of a most beautiful ring but unlike the *Gesta* the father's ring appears to have no miraculous powers. Rather, the son to which the ring was given to "... was to be looked upon as his heir, and the others were to honour and respect him as the head of the family."¹⁰⁵ The father, however, could not decide which of his sons should inherit the ring because he loved them all equally but he had already promised each of them separately that they would be inheriting the ring. Melchizedek continues his story, telling Saladin that the father carefully commissioned two exact copies of his ring and upon his passing, each son separately received their promised inheritance. Melchizedek concludes his story with the following:

After their father's death, they all desired to succeed to his title and estate, and each man denied the claims of the others, producing his ring to prove his case. But finding that the rings were so alike that it was impossible to tell them apart, the question of which of the sons was the true and rightful heir remained in abeyance, and has never been settled.

And I say to you, my lord, that the same applies to the three laws which God the Father granted to His three peoples, and which formed the subject of your inquiry. Each of them considers itself the legitimate heir to His estate, each believes it possesses His one

¹⁰⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. Penguin Books (London: 2003) 197.

¹⁰⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. Penguin Books (London: 2003) 198.

true law and observes His commandments. But as with the rings, the question as to which of them is right remains in abeyance.¹⁰⁶

The story of Melchizedek and Saladin concludes with Saladin's realization that Melchizedek has manoeuvred out of the trap that he had laid for him. Saladin confesses his initial intentions to Melchizedek and expresses his desire to restart their relationship on honest grounds while also asking if Melchizedek could assist him with a loan. He agrees, providing Saladin with a generous loan which Saladin pays back in full, and the two men become lifelong friends with Saladin making Melchizedek a part of his sultanate court.¹⁰⁷

Contrary to the way the parable is employed in the *Gesta*, the function of the parable in the context of the larger story of Melchizedek and Saladin was one of more overt pluralism, in that it acknowledged the legitimacy of each religion and their claim of true faith. The father loved each of his sons equally, he gave each of them rings, and the retelling ended without a definitive answer regarding which of the three sons had the true ring. In this sense, it could be viewed that any one of the three could be in possession of the original copy, and that they all had an equal chance to receive it. This is perhaps the closest expression of true tolerance in comparison to the *Gesta* and *Peace of Faith*. While the latter presented some initial ambiguity as to the solutions of their problematics - which son possessed the knight's true ring in the *Gesta* and what form the singular unified faith would take in *Peace of Faith* - and that the initial ambiguity could have meant that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam could be equally considered, their conclusions demonstrated that Christianity would be the sole heir.

With the *Decameron* version of the parable, the ambiguity of the answer to Saladin's question is maintained throughout the text. As a result, the use of the ring as a motif between the *Gesta* and the *Decameron* underwent a similar shift in meaning. The ring of the third son

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 198-9.

¹⁰⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. Penguin Books (London: 2003) 199.

in the *Gesta* was eventually revealed as a sign of Christianity as the true faith, implying that the rings of the two elder sons were visually appealing but ultimately worthless as they were not imbued with Christian faith. This essentially implied that while the rites and laws of Judaism and Islam as represented by the two elder sons were also appealing in their aesthetic nature but worthless in the eyes of God. With the *Decameron*, the rings were essentially equal to each other because it was not stated which one functioned as a true symbol of faith. As Pamela D. Stewart noted in her comparison of the Ringparabel in the *Decameron* to earlier Italian versions, the version of the parable included by Boccaccio was quite daring for the time. The uncertain ending in Melchizedek's recounting of the parable shows not only the "human inability to argue convincingly for any single one of them [biblical religions] ... Out of the diversity of religions, faith, the very act of believing, emerges as the only true value."¹⁰⁸ It is perhaps because of this interpretation, one in which none of the three Abrahamic religions are validated as the singular truth, that the *Decameron* would face censorship by the Catholic Church in the 16th century.

Boccaccio's collection was included in the original *Index librorum prohibitorum*, a list of written works and authors that were deemed 'forbidden' to Christian readers what was first published in 1559 under Pope Paul IV (1555-59).¹⁰⁹ As a result of public outcry over the banning of such a popular collection of stories, two censored versions were published several decades later: a version in 1573, which edited the ending of the parable in Filomena's story, and a second version in 1582 which fully omitted the parable in its entirety.¹¹⁰ In the case of

¹⁰⁸ Pamela D. Stewart, "The Tale of the Three Rings (I.3)" in *The Decameron First Day in Perspective*. University of Toronto Press (Toronto: 2004) 102-3.

¹⁰⁹ Christina McGrath, "Manipulated, Misrepresented and Maligned: the Censorship and *Rassettatura* of the *Decameron*" in *Heliotropia*. University of Massachusetts (Amherst: 2018) 192.

¹¹⁰ Pamela D. Stewart, "The Tale of the Three Rings (I.3)" in *The Decameron First Day in Perspective*. University of Toronto Press (Toronto: 2004) 103. In 1584, just two years after the second censored version, an Italian miller named Menocchio cited his reading of the *Decameron* as a source for his theological views, particularly for his understanding in the equality of the Abrahamic faiths, during his trial for the charge of heresy. His trial and views are most famously chronicled in *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) by Carlo Ginzburg.

censorship in Reformation Germany, the censorship by the Catholic Church was less effective as Protestant Germans would not have referred to the *Index*, but to secular authorities.¹¹¹ While censorship efforts had been undertaken in Germany as early as 1475, in 1496 the regulations on the censorship of books would be extended to cover all aspects of production and eventually central commissions would be created around the birth of the Reformation in order to impede the flow of potentially ‘harmful’ material.¹¹²

With this said, the understanding of faith via the ring parable was malleable in the hands of the author and such parables were influential in suggesting divergent perspectives around faith and the spiritual ‘other’. With the continued desire of Reformation Germany to present a unified imperial front, parables that were written for popular consumption that presented Jews and Turks/Muslims as potentially equal to Christians could prove to be counter-intuitive in the project of strengthening a German Christian nation. Additionally, the rhetorical use of rings as a symbol of the parity between faiths could prove to be equally counter-intuitive in this project. In the immediate reality at the time in the 16th century, as the *Judenring* was cemented in the criminal code by the 1530s and included in local Jewish ordinances in the 1540s and beyond, the censoring of the ring parable in the *Decameron* could be considered an attempt at reinterpreting the symbolism of rings, including the *Judenring*, more broadly. If Melchizedek’s ring parable demonstrated at the most basic level that the three Abrahamic faiths each possessed a ring representing the legitimacy of their faiths, how would the common person reading the story then think of the ring badge being worn by Jews in their immediate reality?

At the same time that the meaning of the written parable of the three rings was being formed and re-formed through new additions and censorship, other print mediums would

¹¹¹ Elisabeth Gibbels, “Suppression and Defiance: Translation and Censorship in Germany” in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Censorship*. Routledge (Abingdon: 2025) 38.

¹¹² Ibid, 37.

connect the *Judenring* and the ring symbol more broadly to German Jews in a far more rhetorically vicious manner.

Broadsheets and illustrations

It is hard to underestimate the significance of the printed image when considering the spread of information and ideas in Reformation Germany. Perhaps even more accessible for the transmission of symbols than texts like the *Gesta* and the *Decameron*, the images and early caricatures that were produced as part of pamphlets and broadsheets were absorbed by common people as sources of news and debate especially during the Reformation.¹¹³ These illustrations, which were generally produced using the woodcut block printing technique, were often highly detailed and could contain layers of symbolism and meaning that were culturally relevant at the time of production. Consequently, these pictorial depictions of people and current events can provide a window through which we can see and understand not only how these subjects were understood at the time of creation but how they were presented to the general public. It is important to note that the images in the following sections are woodcut or woodblock prints, which meant that each image was meticulously carved into wood before being covered in ink and pressed into parchment. When we view these images today, we must consider the time it took to create these images, and the intense attention to detail. Everything in the image is intentional and endowed with meaning, both for the contemporary audiences of early modern Germany and to us, several centuries later.

There has existed a misconception that Lutheran reformers during Martin Luther's lifetime were anti-image, likely stemming from the Protestant aversion to the use of imagery and relics in Catholicism and the iconoclastic destruction of images that did not fit the needs

¹¹³ Petra Schöner, "Visual Representations of Jews and Judaism in the Sixteenth-Century" in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*. Brill (Leiden: 2016) 372-3.

and beliefs of Lutherans. However, visuals were an intrinsic part of the religious experience and especially so in the experience of the divine. While Lutherans destroyed images, they also created new images of their own to replace what was no longer there, and this was a crucial component of disseminating the ideas of the Reformation. In an article on the evolution of visuals in late medieval and early modern culture, Charles Zika wrote that “[t]he success of particular representations, about peasant behaviour, religious devotion... depends on their capacity to be communicated by different media and to be integrated with different discourses... This cultural integration seems a fundamental step in the process of universalising meaning and subsequently of achieving broad social acceptance.”¹¹⁴ With this, it is worth considering and analysing popular images in relation to popular moral stories in order to see how the presentation of the *Judenring* and both the theological and popular rhetoric surrounding the symbol of the badge itself.

Tyrannei, Wücher und Heuchelei

Some of the earliest block prints from 16th century Germany that still survive today are from the German Peasants’ War (1525-26). Popular rebellions had begun as a result of the crushing serfdom and poverty experienced by German peasants, though the beginning of the Reformation in 1517 as a challenge to the practices of the Catholic Church was also a likely contributor to rising tensions in German society. Of particular interest to this section is the division between Martin Luther, who was opposed to the peasant uprisings, and Thomas Müntzer, a Lutheran Reformer who supported the peasants. In turn, the revolt led to a number of pamphlets and woodcut images being produced as not only a way to capture the attention of

¹¹⁴ Charles Zika, “Writing the visual into history: changing cultural perceptions of late medieval and Reformation Germany” in *Parergon*. Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Perth: 1993) 134.

the common people, but also as forums for debate and the proliferation of suggestions for the causes of the revolt both during the conflict and after.

During the revolts, Martin Luther wrote a pamphlet titled *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* in May 1525, in which he advocated against the abolition of serfdom. Luther believed that the end of serfdom would “make all men equal, and in turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom...”¹¹⁵ On the contrary, Müntzer’s sermons and theological writings from the time of the revolts echoed the third article of the Twelve Articles created by the revolting faction.¹¹⁶ Unlike Luther, Müntzer had a far more tolerant perspective: “The Christian faith which I preach [disagrees] with that of Luther... For even if someone were born a Turk he still has the beginning of the same faith, that is, the movement of the holy spirit.”¹¹⁷ Müntzer’s statement echoed the ideas and themes found in *Peace of Faith*, that although the Abrahamic religions are differentiated in their ritual practice, they are from the same origin source. Müntzer, along with several of the figureheads on the peasants’ side, was killed during the war and the revolt itself was also crushed not long after. A year later, Nuremberg printmaker Peter Flötner created his woodcut *Tyrannei, Wücher und Heuchelei* (fig. 6) in 1526 with accompanying text from Hans Sachs, an accomplished poet and playwright also from Nuremberg.

Flötner’s print showed three male figures as the human personifications of what he considered to be the three main problems plaguing society, and by extension the aggravating factors for the revolts: *Tyrannei* (Tyranny), dressed in armour and holding a flaming spear; *Wücher* (Usury), with a *Judenring* on his left shoulder as he skins the horse; and *Gleißnerei/Heuchelei* (Hypocrisy), a monk who has fallen under the horse with his coins

¹¹⁵ O.L. Silverman, “We Are Free and We Wish to Be Free: Political Thought and the Peasants’ War” in *History of the Present*. Duke University Press (Durham: 2025) 105.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 106. “It has hitherto been the custom for the lords to treat us as their serfs, which is pitiable since Christ has redeemed and brought us all by the shedding of his precious blood. ...Therefore, it is demonstrated by scripture that we are free, and we wish to be free.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 106.

spilling out from his pouch.¹¹⁸ The word just above the horse, *Der armgemeinesel*, reads “the poor common man”, representing the labour of the common people on which Tyranny and Usury rely and extract from. The remaining three female figures are *Vernunft/Vernunft* (Reason), who holds a sheet to cover the eyes of the poor common man.

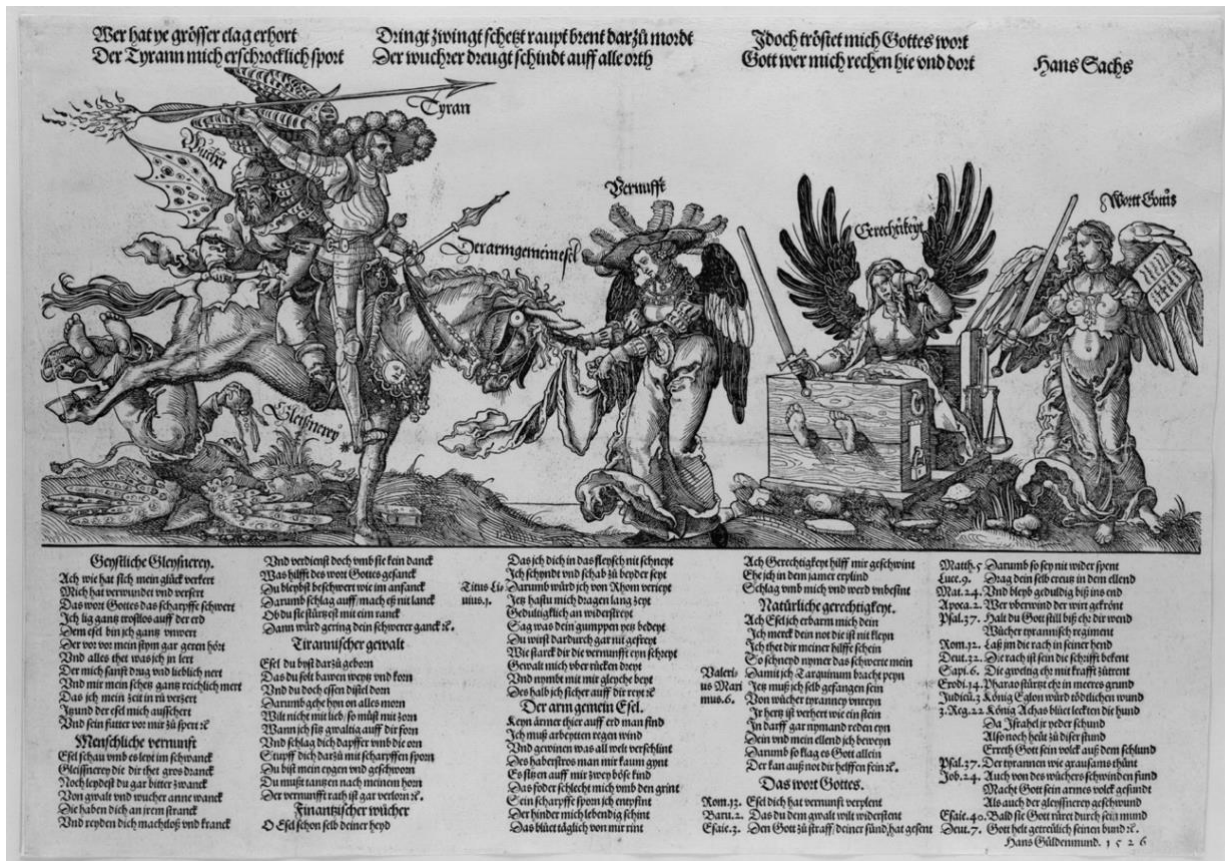


Figure 27: Tyrannei, Wücher und Heuchelei im Kampf gegen die Vernunft, Gerechtigkeit und das Wort Gottes (Tyranny, Usury and Hypocrisy in battle with Reason, Justice and the Word of God), Peter Flömer (1526). From Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

Gerechtikeyt/Gerechtigkeit (Justice), who is trapped in stocks with her scales hung up on the side; and *Wortt Gottis/das Wort Gottes* (Word of God) who stands the strongest in opposition to Tyranny and Usury. The lines of text above the scene reads as follows:

Who has heard a greater cry?

The tyrant terrifies me.

¹¹⁸ The spellings of some words in German have changed from the 16th century to present day. The old spelling, which is used in the illustration, is presented first followed by the new spelling, which is used in the modern title and credit.

He presses, forces, protects, and kills.

Usury spreads strain to all places.

Yet God's word comforts me.

God, who will redeem me here and there.

The text along the bottom is written in a third person perspective, sometimes addressing the poor common man directly but primarily speaking to the reader. Each subtitled section critically addresses one of the figures, including the poor common man. What is most pertinent here however is the depiction of, and text about, Usury, which makes the connection between Jews (through the appearance of the *Judenring*), usury, and direct harm to the poor common man as Usury literally skins the back leg of the horse. The man meant to represent usury bears very few signs that would otherwise indicate that he is Jewish, but his identity is conveyed through the small badge on his shoulder. In this sense, the ring symbol is tied to usury within the illustration. The text about Usury also provides some inferences:

Financial usury (paragraph 4)

Oh donkey, even of your own nation

That I didn't cut you in the flesh

I cut and shave both of you

That's why I was banished from Rome

Now you've dragged me for a long time

Patiently resisted

Tell me what your swearing means now

You won't be happy about it at all

How strong reason screams to you

Power over me from behind

And takes the same power as me

That's why I'm riding safely on you.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Translation is my own.

In this illustration and accompanying text, usury is depicted as the force behind Tyranny both in a literal and an allegorical sense. Because usury helped fund the war efforts of princes, among other projects and uses, Flötner and Sachs expanded this to include the general tyranny exerted by princes and other imperial authorities. Again in the text, there is also the allusion to Usury profiting or otherwise reaping rewards off of the labouring of the poor common man as Usury taunts him. In this sense, the practice of usury and the people with whom the practice was associated with could be seen as the driving force behind the evil and treachery that Flötner illustrated. The appearance of the *Judenring* further ties Jews to the idea that they are behind usurious evil, the force which supports tyranny.

There is also frequent mention throughout the text that a steadfast belief in the Word of God will defeat tyranny and usury. In the second paragraph, Reason says to the poor common man “What good does the sound of God’s word do?/You remain burdened as before” in an attempt to drive the poor common man away from the Word of God, something which is reflected in Usury saying “Tell me what your swearing means now/You won’t be happy about it at all/How strong reason screams to you”. This aligned with some previously demonstrated arguments used by Christian authorities to dissuade Christians from engaging Jewish usurers as they believed that aside from the practice of usury being an antithetical to the religion that the contact between Jews and Christians in the process could lead to Christians turning away from their faith.

In fact, this very fear would be illustrated in a broadside produced in 1615 titled *Der Juden Badstüb*, in which a wealthy German merchant comes into contact with Jewish usurers and is gradually transformed into a Jewish man himself as a result. In returning to Reason and Usury, Usury taunts the poor common man by asking what his prayers and devotion to God are doing for him now. At the end of the text, the Word of God commends the poor common man for his faith:

Therefore, do not be afraid again (Matt. 5)

Cross yourselves in misery (Luke 9)

And remain patient to the end (Matt. 24)

He who overcomes will be crowned (Revelation 2)

Often in these woodcuts and broadsheets produced during and after the Reformation that depicted pious Christians locked in struggle with wicked Jews, emphasis would be placed on the patience of the Christians in seeing justice for the wrongs committed by the Jews. It is a notable turn from the previous doctrine espoused in late medieval and early modern Catholicism, that the Jews were not to be eliminated from the borders of the Christian faith as they could instead come to know the truth of Christianity.

Der Juden Erbarkeit

By the time of the Reformation in 1517 and later to the 1540s, when Catholic theologian Johannes Eck wrote *Refutation of a Jewish Booklet* (1541) and his Protestant enemy Martin Luther wrote *Von der Juden* (1543), Jews had not converted *en masse* to Christianity, be it Catholicism or Protestantism. As German Catholics and Protestants sought to extoll the virtues of their respective sects against the perceived flaws in practice and doctrine on the other side, German Jews increasingly saw themselves featured not only as direct targets of polemics like those of Eck and Luther, but the *Judenring* itself being used to denote supposed godlessness and lack of true faith without the potential for salvation. In this sense, ‘the Jew’ could also be used by Catholics or Protestants as a way to negatively define the other through association. This had been the case in earlier disputes between individual theologians and preachers, namely in the pamphlets traded between Catholic scholar Johann Reuchlin and Catholic convert Johannes Pfefferkorn just prior to the Reformation. After the initiation of the Reformation, as Vincent Evener writes, “Luther and [Johannes] Bugenhagen connected Jewish and papist rejection of Christ as the sole way to salvation, seeing the rejection of Christ in scripture by

both Jews and papists as continuous with the Jews' earlier rejection of Christ as promised through prophets and incarnate... Jewish rejection of Christ, moreover, was motivated by pride and self-serving reason rather than mere ignorance."¹²⁰ Simultaneously, German Catholics following the lead of Eck continued to use arguments against the Jews that had been developed in the Middle Ages, namely blood libel accusations and collective guilt for the death of Christ.¹²¹

The themes of pride and self-serving reason, along with accusations of complete godlessness, proved popular in the wood cuts and later broadsheets that were more easily distributed to the common people. Satirical booklets and pamphlets used shocking illustrations of anthropomorphized pigs, wolves, and horned creatures of all kinds wearing the *Judenring* as a way of denoting their Jewishness and thus their allegiance. One of the prime examples of this is the cover of *Der Juden Erbarkeit* (The Jews' Honesty) from 1571 (fig. 7).

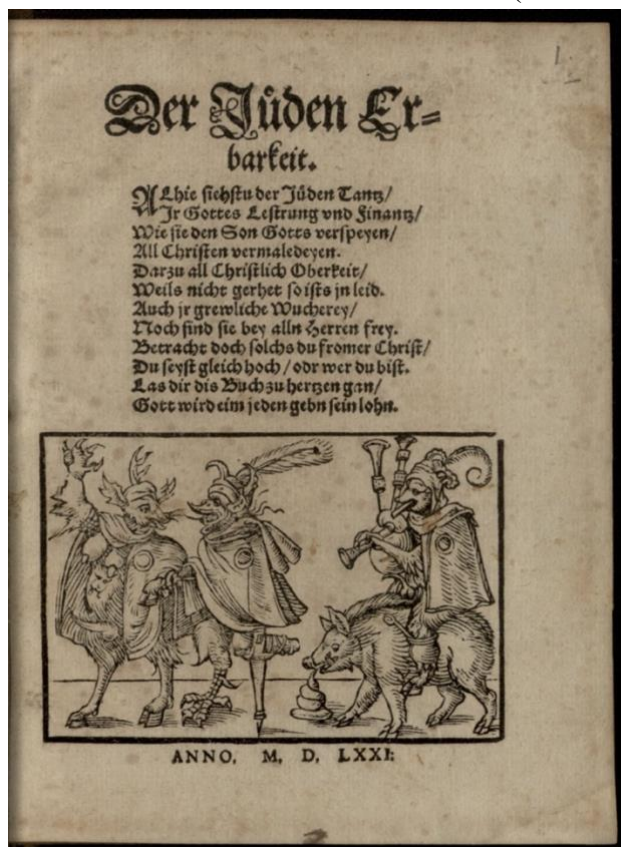


Figure 35: *Der Juden Erbarkeit* written by an anonymous author, 1571. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

¹²⁰ Vincent Everer, "Our Jews: Anti-Judaism and the Formation of Reformation-Era Christians" in *The Journal of Religion*. University of Chicago Press (Chicago: 2019) 407.

¹²¹ Robert Bireley, "The Catholic Reform, Jews, and Judaism in Sixteenth-Century Germany" in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*. Brill (Leiden: 2016) 251.

The booklet itself is a satire on Jewish usurers, one that emphasised the supposedly evil nature of the practice and the practitioners. The cover presents a number of anti-Jewish visual tropes, some of which were more widespread at the time and thus have been the subject of art history investigations, like the use of pigs and feces which had been prominently featured in *Judensau* reliefs on churches and other public spaces for centuries by the time of *Erbarkeit's* printing.¹²² Other visual tropes are more complex, such as the specific animals used to represent Jewish people and the broken leg of the figure in the centre. This visual trope has been less extensively investigated in scholarship surrounding anti-Jewish visuals but is worth a discussion in the context of *Erbarkeit* and the subsequent broadsheets in this chapter. Eric Zafran in his 1979 article “Saturn and the Jews” mentioned the appearance of crutches and canes in depictions of Jews:

The cane or crutch became a common attribute of pilgrims, vagabonds, beggars – the children of Saturn who must make their way upon earth. Frequently in anti-Semitic propaganda Jews were also depicted supporting themselves with canes but here clearly to indicate a moral and spiritual decrepitude. More importantly the staff was also a symbol of exile. Certainly the best known exiles were the Jews...¹²³

Zafran also discussed the appearance of disabilities, and specifically in *Erbarkeit* and the connections made in the late 15th century to Saturn as a planetary body, Saturnian physiology according to popular belief at the time, and connected belief in the supposed Saturnian nature of Jews:

Saturn himself ‘adumbrating his even more repulsive mutilation’, came to be depicted as a cripple with a wooden leg... Such an image must have been the basis for one more work connecting the attributes of Saturn and the Jews [*Erbarkeit*]... which attacked

¹²² For a detailed history of the *Judensau* motif in European art, see: Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art – An Illustrated History*. Continuum Publishing (New York: 1996) 20.

¹²³ Eric Zafran, “Saturn and the Jews” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. University of Chicago Press (Chicago: 1979) 22.

Jewish usury. Here the hybrid caricature of the Jews combines the devil, pig and cripple as well as lechery... into a visual catalogue of Jewish and Saturnine traits.”

Returning to *Erbarkeit*, the animals themselves are comprised of a number of animalic features, making it difficult to parse if they are pigs, rodents, birds, or donkeys, but this is purposeful. These figures are drawn this way to emphasize their unnatural nature and their creation by a false god or the devil, rather than by God himself who created mankind in his image. This theme of godlessness is also reflected in the poem just above the illustration, which in translation reads:

Here you see the Jews' dance
Their God is deception and finance
How they spit on the Son of God
All Christians are condemned.
And all Christian authorities
Because it doesn't work out, it's misery.
Even their terrible usury
They are still free among all lords.
Consider this, you pious Christian
No matter how high you are or whoever you are.
Let this book sink in to your heart.
God will give everyone their reward.¹²⁴

The *Judenring* is also centred and facing the viewer at all times, regardless of how the figures are positioned, which is also intentional. Among the exaggerated and outlandish depictions of these grotesque beasts, the *Judenring* acts as a tie to reality and everyday life. Of course, the common people viewing the cover of this booklet or Peter Flötner's earlier illustration would not have been seeing devilish beasts dancing or winged people skinning horses in their physical realities, but they would of course be familiar with the *Judenring* and

¹²⁴ Translation is my own.

who in their society was made to wear it. The connection would then be made between the *Judenring* and real-life German Jews to the figures or characters wearing the badge in illustrations like these. It created a self-sustaining albeit circular logic, wherein the presence of one element justifies the other. Depictions like *Erbarkeit* which used animals or other non-humans in place of human Jews were popular for satires, but they could often be much more direct in showing the supposed ties between Jews and the unnatural, or the evil.

Fettmilch

Before discussing the next broadsheet, it is important to foreground the social and economic circumstances that in no doubt had a hand in influencing the images and rhetoric used in its production. Like many cities, Frankfurt adopted Protestantism in 1533, and the balance of power between Catholics and Protestants in the governance of the city shifted entirely Protestant. Lutheran patricians enjoyed significant political and financial power, as not only was the city council comprised of Lutherans but also it was overwhelmingly patrician with few spots for guild members.¹²⁵ As a result, the patricians were able to consolidate their power and wealth, even as the plight of regular citizens grew more dire. By the 17th century, an estimated half of Frankfurt's population of 18 000 lived in poverty.¹²⁶ With some of the city's Jewish residents being involved in moneylending, the suspicion and anger towards the community that had already existed began to grow larger and more intense.

By 1614, after fruitless discussions and negotiations with the city council followed by the discovery of the previous council's mismanagement of funds, the patrician-dominated council resigned after being locked in city hall by angry burghers. Emperor Matthias (1612-1619) ordered the council to be reinstated, but after a failed attempt by imperial commissioners

¹²⁵ John Roger Paas, *The German Political Broadsheet, 1600-1700: Volume I*. Otto Harrassowitz (Wiesbaden) 105.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 105.

to turn guild members against their leadership, violence broke out. A group of men from various guilds under the leadership of baker Vincent Fettmilch stormed the *Judengasse* and began ransacking the homes and businesses of the Jewish residents, whom the mob believed to be the cause of their strife. Fettmilch ordered the Jews out of the city, with nearly 1400 Jews leaving their only permitted place of residence.¹²⁷ Frankfurt's Jews had been driven out of the city from mid 1614 until early 1616, when they were escorted back into Frankfurt by imperial authorities after Fettmilch and his associates were arrested and later executed. The *Judenstätigkeit* from Chapter 1 dates to early 1614, just before the expulsion. Just after the Jews had been welcomed back into Frankfurt in 1616, the city council reissued the *Judenstätigkeit* of 1614 but opened with a short note on the Fettmilch uprising:

Accordingly, in the previous Frankfurt disturbances, the common Jews of Frankfurt were attacked, plundered, and driven from the city, and it was noted that the most odious violence perpetrated against them was almost largely the result of a lack of understanding, their established regulations, and their lack of authority, which was exerted under pressure during the disturbances without the permission of the council, thereby embittering the common people all the more...

In order to prevent such misconduct and mischief as much as possible in the future, and to ensure that everyone in the city remain in peace and quiet, and that the Council and the Citizenry, as well as the Jews, have clear information about their reprehensible behaviour towards one another, we, as Imperial Commissioners, have also issued a letter from the Most Highly Respected Emperor...¹²⁸

With this said, there are few if any meaningful differences between the copy from 1614 and the reissued *Judenstätigkeit* of 1616. The section pertaining to the *Judenring* remained untouched between the two versions, and the symbol persisted. Despite the acknowledgement of the damage caused to the Jews and the ease with which they were targeted in the *Judengasse*,

¹²⁷ John Roger Paas, *The German Political Broadsheet, 1600-1700: Volume I*. Otto Harrassowitz (Wiesbaden: 1985) 108.

¹²⁸ Frankfurter Judenordnung 1616. Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main.

the city council did not see it necessary to remove the stigma attached to their very clothes and wished to maintain the visibility that in no doubt enabled such violence.

Der Juden Badstub

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a satirical broadside titled *Der Juden Badstub* was created in 1615 by an anonymous printmaker (fig.8). Interestingly, there had already been a broadsheet published by Philip von Allendorf with the same title in 1535, though the subject matter was different: the “uselessness of baptism for Jews.” Elisheva Carlebach wrote that according to Allendorf’s broadsheet, “Water spent on baptism of Jews was wasted in his view. Jews were destined for another type of bath – in the vapors of hell.”¹²⁹ Returning to the *Badstub* of 1615, sixteen of the nineteen panels relay a coherent story that plays on anti-Jewish fears about a German Christian coming into contact with two Jews through a bath house, which leads to the Christian transforming into a Jew himself. His transformation is marked by two specific physical changes: a physical disability in the form of a crutch in panel 13, and the appearance of a *Judenring* on his chest in panel 14. We could understand these panels as the demonstration of a very literal fear, one nestled deep within the popular teachings of Christianity: becoming the other. Legal requirements like the *Judenring* and the confinement of Jews to the *Judengasse* enabled a physical and visual separation from Christians, which thereby reduced the likelihood of supposed infiltration or ‘Judaization’ of Christians. This latter fear existed in the Christian imagination since the beginning of Christian theology itself with the followers of St. Peter, as Steven Aschheim notes.¹³⁰ Aschheim also explains that “All signs of heresy, any kind of dissent, could be labelled as ‘Judaizing’ activities... Words like *judeln* (1522) and *mauscheln*

¹²⁹ Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls – Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1700*. Yale University Press (New Haven: 2008) 35.

¹³⁰ Steven Aschheim, “‘The Jew Within’: The Myth of ‘Judaization’ in Germany” in *Culture and Catastrophe*. Palgrave Macmillan (London: 1996) 46.

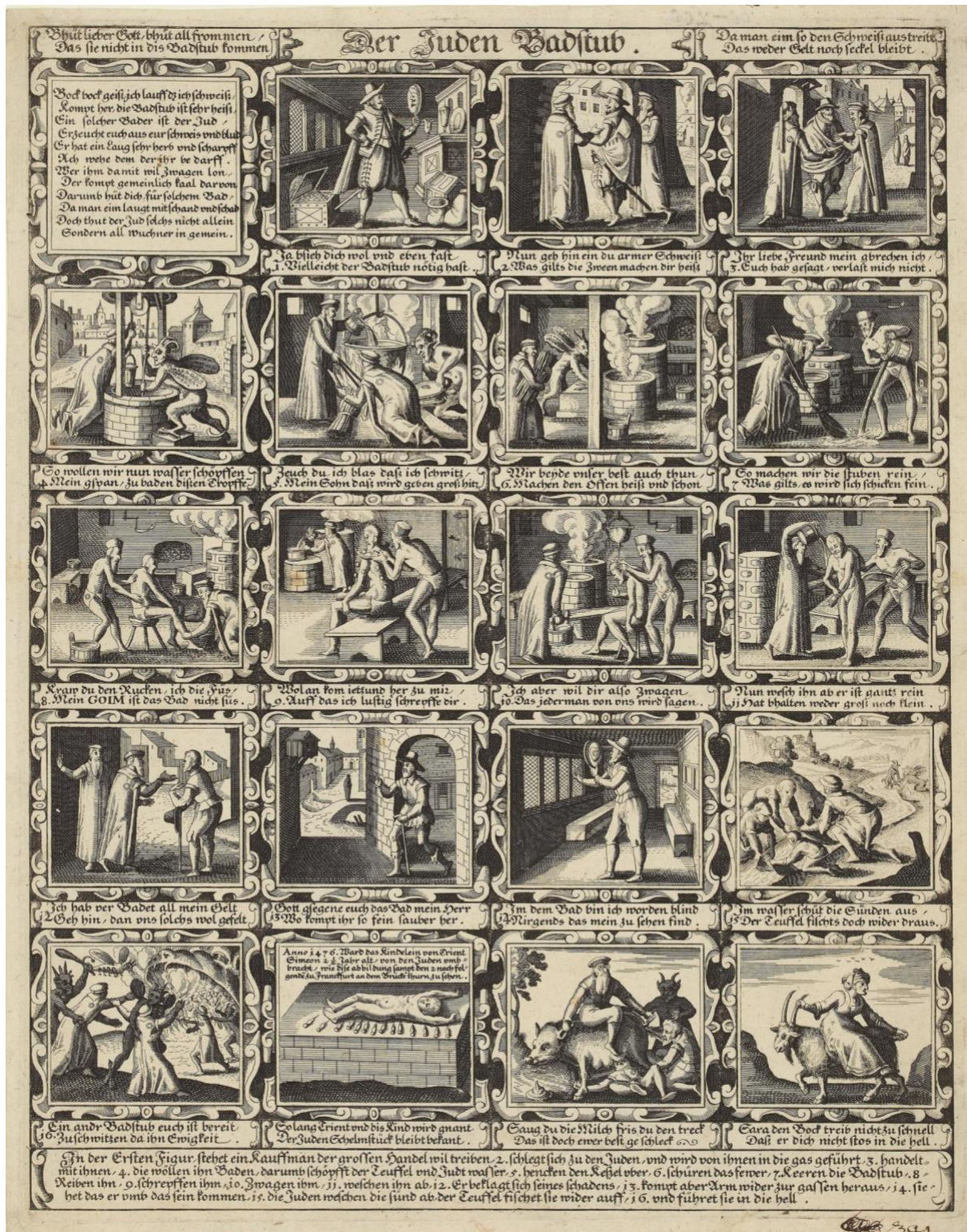


Figure 36: Der Juden Badstub, anonymous, 1615. Trustees of the British Museum.

(1680) entered into general German usage as pejorative terms indicating distasteful (Jewish) ways of thinking, talking, and economic dealing... Indeed, those [Christians] who engaged in usury were often themselves labelled as *Kristenjuden*.”¹³¹ These early modern ideas of Jewish infiltration were powerful at stoking fear of the Jewish other, the religious invader. Fears of infiltration would expand beyond the bounds of religion during the Enlightenment and would come to pose a threat to German spirit, and later race.

After the Christian is transformed, he finds that all of the goods he had before entering the bath have been taken, and he has been left with nothing. This, along with the text below the illustration in panel 17, tells the viewer that not only has his contact with the two Jews led to his transformation into a Jew, but that they have also robbed him of everything. They have ‘cleaned him’ out in both sense of the term. We could also understand the bath given to the Christian man by the Jews as being a sort of reverse-baptism, where instead of being purified for God and entry into the church, he is physically and spiritually contaminated by this Jewish bath. The devil appears in several of these panels, assisting the Jews in preparing the bath in panels 4-6, and reappearing in panel 16 to usher the two Jews into the mouth of a beast and where there are already other Jews being burned by what is presumably hellfire. This would indicate that despite having done the bidding of the devil in leading a Christian away from his virtuous life, there is simply no way to prevent the inevitable damnation coming to the Jews. It would also seem to suggest that the author believed in a level of Jewish servitude to the devil, and that they are compelled to act on the devil’s plans out of obligation in contrast to Christians acting on the obligation of their faith in God.

The final three panels are entirely irrelevant to the larger narrative of the story being told, but they are instead intended to reinforce the heinous and obscene acts that Jews had been commonly accused of engaging in historically. The first of these unrelated panels shows the

¹³¹ Ibid, 47.

alleged torture and murder of Simon of Trent from 1475, a major blood libel invented in Italy after the death of a young boy that eventually spread to German-speaking regions through printed pamphlets. While blood libel rumours involving the killing of Christian children had been manufactured for centuries, the story of Simon of Trent occupied a significant amount of space in the cultural thought and memory of European Christians.¹³² This could perhaps be owed to the young age of the child, along with the trial and execution of the Italian Jews who had been accused of the crime. It could also be due to the discovery of Simon's body being on March 26, 1475, which was also Easter Sunday. The trial had produced gruesome details about the young boy's death which had been detailed by a supposed witness to the crime, a Jew who had claimed to have participated in the torture. The remaining Jews in Trent were expelled soon after, and the story travelled beyond Trent and into the imaginations of Christians who had already been primed to accept the details as they were presented. Simon of Trent became a symbol in his own right, depicted in the same style shown in *Der Juden Badstube* and even granted saintly status by the Catholic Church.¹³³

Not long after the blood libel had made its way to German-speaking regions, the scene of his torture was painted on the side of the main bridge tower in Frankfurt, which connected the Jewish ghetto with Frankfurt proper. The image confronted all those going to and from the ghetto, Christian or Jewish, and served as a reminder to Christians as they were crossing of what the Jews had allegedly done.¹³⁴ The inclusion of the torture scene in this broadsheet performs this same function, as do the two following panels showing a *Judensau* scene and a Jewish woman engaged with a goat, the latter scene also being a visual allusion to the devil as

¹³² Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Alleged Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent (1475) and Its Literary Repercussions: A Bibliographical Study" in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*. American Academy for Jewish Research (Ann Arbor: 1993) 103-135.

¹³³ Simon of Trent lost his sainthood in the 1960s, during a period when the Catholic Church as an institution strove to create a lasting dialogue and relationship with Jews.

¹³⁴ The bridge tower in question, and the torture scene, remained as part of the bridge over the river Main until 1801, when parts of the bridge underwent reconstruction.

the animal was often associated with the demonic.¹³⁵ While not directly connected to the story told through the majority of the panels, the totality of the broadsheet showcases a collection of visual and narrative tropes in the goal of dissuading Christians from having contact with Jews. In every panel where a Jewish man is displayed, his *Judenring* is directly facing the viewer regardless of his position. The *Judenring* is not just featured on the outerwear of the figures, which in reality was a detail specified in both section 22 of the *Code Carolina Criminalis* and in the Frankfurt *Judenstätigkeit*, but also on the underwear of one of the Jews in panels 7 to 11. It would perhaps imply that even after stripping off external layers, the ring itself and Jewishness by extension are ever-present and inescapable.

Jüdischer gelber Ring

Three years later in 1618, another anonymous printmaker created a satirical broadsheet illustration titled *Meßkram vor die Juden oder Jüdischer gelber Ring* (Stuff of the Jews or Jewish yellow ring). The first line of the four-panel illustration opens with the following: “Everyone wants to know/Why do the Jews wear yellow rings?” (Fig. 9). With this broadsheet, the text is an integral piece to understanding each scene depicted. From top left to right the text in translation reads as follows:

Everyone wants to know
Why do the Jews wear yellow rings?
Well I will let you know
It might be the right thing to do.

¹³⁵ Irvn M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages*. The Catholic University of America (Washington D.C.: 2012) 237.



Figure 37: Meßkram vor die Juden oder Jüdischer gelber Ring (Stuff of the Jews or Jewish yellow ring)
Anonymous, 1618. Trustees of the British Museum.

First it is because they are of the Devil
That is why you find such a sign on him
For when you listen to the torment
They scream O! O!

Or because they cheat and swindle a lot
They have such a big notation
Because it makes a big sum
If it is placed after the number.

Or if this sign is placed before the number
It means nothing at all
So this notation shows us clearly
That Jews are nothing against us Christians.¹³⁶

The first panel shows a group of Christian men opposite a group of Jewish men, distinguished by their *Judenring* badges. Their posture could suggest they are engaged in conversation or debate, though the image itself is not detailed enough outside of these two groups of men in the foreground. It could be possible that the Christian man is in fact asking about the badge. In the second panel, the Jewish men are being cast into the flames of hell by the devil and his underlings, who also take on the unnatural mixed-animal traits that were shown on the cover of *Erbarkeit*. The *Judenring* is again directly facing the reader regardless of which way the men are facing, once again serving as a connection from the imagined pits of hellfire to the real *Judenring* badge. The author suggested in his commentary that the badge is in this ring shape to mimic the cries of the damned. In the third panel, the Jewish men are stripping the clothes and belongings from the Christian men. The accompanying commentary suggests that the cheating and swindling, as pictured in the panel, is the reason for why the

¹³⁶ Translation is my own. The Latin text at the bottom of the broadsheet is a translation of the German text that accompanies the illustrations.

Jews are wealthy according to the perspective of the author. Here, it is suggested that the badge represents the supposed dubious inflation of the Jews' wealth off of the goods of Christians. In the final panel, what appears to be God descending from the sky casts out the Jewish men from the entry way they are clustered in, and even on the figures in the background of the illustration their badges can still be seen. Opposite them, the Christian men can be seen standing stoically as the sun in the sky shines on them. As is alluded to in the final lines of text, these men are assured in their perceived moral and spiritual superiority to the Jews. While the first lines of text would suggest that the question of "why do the Jews wear yellow rings" would be answered, the author instead provides a few possible meanings before ultimately settling on the statement that "Jews are nothing against us Christians".

Interestingly, many of the points elaborated by the author in this broadsheet are almost identical to a poem that was printed in Italy a century prior in 1516. The translated title of the Battista Guarini poem, *Why the Jews Wear the Letter O*, asks the same question as *Meßkram*. In Flora Cassen's chapter on the symbolic meaning of the Jewish badge in Renaissance Italy, she included the section of the poem that attempts to answer this question:

Condemned to eternal torment, the Hebrew bears it as a sign of his grief;
Or perhaps this vowel is used as a Zero, indicating his nonentity among men;
Or since the Jews get rich through usury, it indicates how they get much out of nothing.¹³⁷

This section of the Italian poem is almost identical to the explanations given in the German broadsheet, which would suggest that the attempt to understand, interpret and later reinterpret the badge as a symbol was not an endeavour exclusive to the Germans. With this conclusion, there is also a sense that the author is alluding to an eventual rebalancing of right and wrong, good and evil, and that the Jews will be reckoned with according to the

¹³⁷ Flora Cassen, *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy*. University of Cambridge Press (Cambridge: 2018) 42.

understanding that God sees the righteousness of the Christians even as they are supposedly victimized by the Jews. In reality, this broadsheet is at best a major reimagining of how the Fettmilch expulsions played out if the roles had been reversed.

By the time of *Meßkram*'s printing in 1618, the *Judenring* had undeniably become a symbol of the German Jew to the public, but the days of Cusa's optimism towards the Jewish embrace of Christ had long since passed. By the early 16th century, it had been used cynically in public feuds as a way to cast aspersions on the trustworthiness and authenticity of belief in the case of Catholic convert Johannes Pfefferkorn, and by 1532 the *Judenring* had been made part of the first criminal code in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Nearing mid-century, Lutheran reformers and Catholic theologians alike had been printing and preaching their fury towards the supposed stubbornness of the Jews in their refusal to convert. The ring, as well as the promise of conversion and redemption it had once symbolized in the minds of perhaps less vitriolic Christian thinkers, had since been reinterpreted and presented to the public alongside grotesque beasts and the devil, and as a symbol of the people to whom the poor common man was to blame for their hardship as serfs. The doubt in who professed the true faith from the written parable had been replaced with a certainty in who were the righteous and who were the damned in the printed image. With this, the rhetorical and semiotic evolution of the ring reached a conclusion that would not be revisited until late in the 18th century, coinciding with the Enlightenment but also a period of gradual change in the way German Jews were tolerated by society.

Epilogue: The Thirty Years' War and the disappearance of the *Judenring*

On the eve of the Thirty Years War, German Jews had started to see very limited gains in tolerance. Though the movement was very slow, some Jews in Frankfurt had begun to transition from simple moneylending and into the general commerce that Frankfurt had become well known for. The wealthy Portuguese Jews in Hamburg, who were the only Jews allowed to reside in the city, had begun importing foreign luxury goods like sugar by way of Portugal.¹³⁸ The gains made in toleration tended to apply only to the wealthier German Jews who could afford to buy and trade in protections and privileges. Additionally, emperors from Maximilian II (1546-76) through to the beginning of the war in 1618 had adopted generally tolerant stances towards Jews, maintaining a longstanding though unevenly applied tradition of imperial protection.¹³⁹ By the 1620s however, the relationship between German Jews and the Holy Roman Emperor had begun to sour under Ferdinand II (1619-1637). An ardent Catholic, Ferdinand II was anti-Protestant and anti-Jewish though he understood the financial benefit that Jewish moneylenders provided not only to the princes and regional administration, but also to the empire directly. This, coupled with the economic crisis called *Kipper und Wipper* of the early war years, meant that once again Jews were obligated to lend money for the financing of the war and the protection of their communities while also having to be the scapegoat for the anger of the common man for the financial struggles they faced. It was an impossible situation, where choosing one option over the other could lead to profound consequences.

By the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and after, major social and political developments were incoming for the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as a result of the physical and human destruction of the war, but also the financial cost of the fighting. Population growth

¹³⁸ Jonathan Israel, "Central European Jewry during the Thirty Years' War" in *Central European History*. Emory University (Atlanta: 1983) 7.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 9.

and the economy overall were stagnant in the years after the war, and by some estimates it took nearly a century to fully recover.¹⁴⁰ However, certain areas fared better than others as a direct result of pre-war economic activity and their location relative to the fighting. Frankfurt was among the cities who maintained a level of economic stability, though this was challenged by the redistribution of funds and materials to help rebuild German areas that had been hard hit by the war. Parity of religion between Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists had also been introduced to the imperial cities, Frankfurt included, and at least in terms of religious violence the half century period following the end of the war in Germany saw fewer outbreaks of violence. Some historians attribute this period of relative religious stability to the rhetorical and physical violence reaching a peak during the war. This is not to say that everything was mended between Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Jews, but rather that much of the energy and religious fervor had been spent during the war. Reforms and the later movement towards rationalism soon came to take the place of religious fighting.

The *Aufklärung*, or the German phase of the Enlightenment, came later than in France and England but also took different inspirations and forms. While the Age of Enlightenment is considered to have started in the late 17th century in western Europe, most of what are considered the major German contributions to the period came in the 18th century. Additionally, Peter Hanns Reill has characterized the primary structural differences between the German *Aufklärung* and the Franco-British Enlightenment as being more modest: “They [Germans] retained a respect for “healthy” tradition and an attachment to long-constituted bodies... The Aufklärers’ religious convictions led them to espouse an idea of history that postulated an interaction between spirit and nature... Spirit and genius remained inexplicable qualities that defied logical analysis.”¹⁴¹ It was perhaps this environment of slow but gradual change that

¹⁴⁰ Michael Hughes, *Early Modern Germany, 1477-1806*. University of Pennsylvania Press (Philadelphia: 1992) 107.

¹⁴¹ Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*. University of California Press (Oakland: 1975; 2018) 8.

inspired further change to the legal circumstances of the Jews through curiosity and constant contradictions between the movement towards rationalist ideals and liberalism while simultaneously clinging to the traditions that helped to make sense of society and its people.

By some accounts, the *Judenring* was no longer worn in Frankfurt by the mid-1710s. In 1714, Johann Jakob Schudt began writing the first major German-language ethnography of Jews, which included accounts of the practices and clothing traditions of German Jews and Jews from around the world. In the last book of his three-volume ethnography, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* (Jewish Curiosities), Schudt tells us the following about the contemporary *Judenring*: “As for the yellow rings on clothes, there is a custom in use especially in Frankfurt (formerly, but not for a few years now), as was decreed on January 28, 1690, that Jews should be required to wear yellow rings in other areas of their lives, especially.”¹⁴² Schudt’s *Merckwürdigkeiten* today provides us with fragments of documents and records, like the *Stättigkeit* of 1690, that have since been lost through time and physical destruction. This description would indicate that the last time the badge ordinance was re-issued by the city council was in 1690, and that between 1690 and 1718, when this last volume of Schudt’s ethnography was written, the Jews in Frankfurt unofficially stopped wearing their badges. A potential trigger for this change could have been the massive fire in the *Judengasse* in 1711, which destroyed nearly all of the ghetto. Schudt’s description of the situation in Frankfurt proper provided a telling glimpse into Jewish and Christian relations:

After the Jews, whose street had completely burned down in January 1711, were allowed to live among the Christians here and there in the city, they learned, through their association with the Christians, to keep their house a little better and cleaner. They must have also liked living among the Christians, because they were so reluctant to return to their street... When, on January 27, 1716, the usual reading of the rites of passage was performed in the evening in the synagogue by the town clerk and the chief judge, the official decree was simultaneously read out that the Jews should retreat to

¹⁴² Johann Jakob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*. Frankfurt: 1718, 447.

their newly built houses, outside the city, into their streets. This order was communicated to them in print.¹⁴³

Curiously, after much of the *Judengasse* had been destroyed due to the fire, the Christians living across the river Main had invited the Jews to live amongst them while their homes were being rebuilt. The Christians and Jews of Frankfurt lived together for approximately five years until the reconstruction efforts were complete. This prolonged intermingling, which had only happened once before due to the Fettmilch uprising a century prior, likely would have led to a relative feeling of familiarity between the two communities now that they lived in the same quarters. Perhaps as a result of this familiarity, the Jews felt as if they no longer needed their badges even as they returned to the reconstructed *Judengasse*. However, the ‘Jewishness’ was still evident to those who looked, as Schudt also explained:

On Shabbat and other holidays, one sees with astonishment how their women wear clothes made of precious material, silk and lots of lace, but everything is not in the right shape, does not look as neat as the Christian clothing, and the Jew peeks out everywhere, even though their fingers are full of rings.¹⁴⁴

The inclusion of rings could of course be taken in the most literal sense as fingers covered in jewellery. But in the larger symbolism that has been investigated throughout this thesis, Schudt’s observation can be understood as yet another denial of worthiness and status. Even more, it can be understood as Schudt remarking upon the immutable ‘Jewishness’ of Jews, which was remarked upon in a similar fashion by Martin Luther and his wreath analogy in Chapter 1. In Schudt’s words, the ‘Jew’ as an infiltrator or infection could never be masked, even if the outward signs were removed, like the discontinuation of the *Judenring*, or carefully concealed through adopting the customs, dress, and rituals of the German Christian. It is

¹⁴³ Johann Jakob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*. Frankfurt: 1718, 374.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 252.

rhetoric that Martin Luther had previously explored in his 1543 anti-Jewish polemic, and rhetoric that would again become popularised in the coming 19th century. Again, the boundary between religious anti-Judaism and racial antisemitism was blurred. The *Judenring* had largely ceased to be used by the end of the 1780s, as a result of the “Edict of Tolerance” issued by Emperor Joseph II in 1782. The last German region of the empire to stop requiring the badge was in Prussia in 1812, the same year King Frederick William III of Prussia issued the “Edict Concerning the Civil Status of the Jews in the Prussian State” which granted Prussian Jews citizenship. The *Judenring* had disappeared from public sight.

By contrast, the *Ringsparabel* makes a reappearance towards the end of the century in German theatre. In 1779, philosopher and prominent *Aufklärung* figure Gotthold Ephraim Lessing first published his play, *Nathan der Weise*. Set in 12th century Jerusalem, the play is widely seen as a call for religious tolerance between the Abrahamic religions. What is considered to be the centrepiece of the play is Nathan’s parable, which is set up in a nearly identical fashion to Filomena’s story about Melchizedek and Saladin in the *Decameron*. In the third act of the play, Nathan, a wealthy Jewish man, is called to speak with Sultan Saladin. In Lessing’s play, Saladin asks Nathan the same question that Melchizedek is asked in the *Decameron*, and Nathan replies with a nearly identical version of the parable that Melchizedek answered with. The ending of Nathan’s telling of the parable is unresolved in the same manner as the version told by Melchizedek. Lessing’s Saladin is touched by the thoughtfulness of Nathan’s answer, and the two become friends. Writers from this period like Lessing and others had also begun to argue the environmentalist theory, as David Sorkin explained: “... the Jews’ faults – so obvious among the poor – were the result of discrimination and disabilities rather than of national character or religion.”¹⁴⁵ On the reception of Lessing’s play, Iris Shagrir wrote

¹⁴⁵ David Sorkin, “Jews, the Enlightenment and Religious Toleration – Some Reflections” in *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. Leo Baeck Institute (New York: 1992) 8.

“Lessing’s play was hailed as a work that embodied the idea of religious tolerance, the contemporary spirit of the Enlightenment in Germany, and the notion that no single, monotheistic “truth” trumped any other one.”¹⁴⁶ However, not everyone felt this way about *Nathan der Weise*.

Nearly a century later in 1895, völkisch poet Max Beyer included a poem in his poetry collection called *Lessing im Lessingtheater* (Lessing in the Lessing Theatre), in which a fictional Lessing goes to a theatre bearing his name to see a production of one of his plays. He enters the theatre and is surrounded by Jewish women, and he then learns that none of his plays are being shown and instead, they are only showing decadent French plays. The poem is an attack on French artistic culture, which was seen as an impure form of art coming from an impure people.¹⁴⁷ It also targets German Jews, who are depicted as having infiltrated German society and erased true German heritage, as the poem ends with Lessing’s name being removed from the theatre and replaced with the name ‘Blumenthal’, after the Jewish owner of the theatre. The middle third of the poem actually addresses the ring parable as it was included in both *Nathan der Weise* and the *Decameron*, and also mentions the *Judenring*. This fictional Lessing, upon meeting the Jewish owner of the theatre, rebuffs him and mocks both the Jewish man and his character Nathan, claiming that “the hunchback Mendelssohn/ advised me of this material/ whom Boccaccio once told us...”¹⁴⁸ Beyer’s Lessing continues, by recounting Filomena’s story from the *Decameron*, laughing “That I seriously turned this fable/ into a parable/ That I equated Muslim, Christian, and Jew, wasn’t that good?”¹⁴⁹ He continues with the following:

But how is it for me?... Couldn't the seed of truth lie here,
even in these treacherous lies?
Shouldn't the right ring,

¹⁴⁶ Iris Shagrir, “Introduction” in *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in European Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2019) 2.

¹⁴⁷ Brian Vick “The Origins of the German Volk: Cultural Purity and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Germany” in *German Studies Review*. Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore: 2003) 249.

¹⁴⁸ Max Beyer, “Lessing im Lessingtheater” in *Gedichte*. Dresden: 1895, 140. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Translation is my own.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

which one son received,
make me "acceptable" in people's eyes?
Isn't it laughable now,
that I must now experience for myself,
how the impudent "Jewish striving"
that I brought into the country
makes me disgusted?
Is it already a mockery of people,
how can this ring then, before God, be the right one?
No! It must be the wrong one!

Germans! Note above all,
that only one of the rings
constantly proves itself to be genuine!
Hold fast to Germanness,
let this ring be highly honoured,
God has placed it on your hand,
it is your fatherland,
and the stone, Christianity,
shone on it like a diamond!
Therefore, both the other rings are false,
they are for you to suffer.¹⁵⁰

Bewer's völkisch philosophy, which was the driving influence in his literary work, encapsulated much of the *Volk* movement that rose out of German romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th century. The ring as part of the parable is no longer a simple symbol of Christian faith, but of 'Germanness' which is also given by God, and the stone adorning the ring is Christianity which is supported by 'Germanness'. George Mosse characterized *Volk* as signifying a united group of people with what he called "transcendental essence", as he described "This 'essence' might be called a 'nature' or 'cosmos' or 'mythos', but in each instance it was fused to man's innermost nature, and represented the source of his creativity, his depth of feeling, his individuality, and his unity with other members of the Volk."¹⁵¹ The agnostic 'spirit' in völkisch philosophy acted as a progression of the earlier German Christian

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 141.

¹⁵¹ George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual origins of the Third Reich*. Schocken Books (New York: 1987) 4.

notion of ‘faith’ in the ring metaphor. Christian faith, which was still important as a marker of identity and belonging in society, was now reinforced by the notion of ‘Germanness’, something which Jews could not obtain according to the völkisch movement. Jews were permanent outsiders from Christianity and Germanness, with or without a physical badge identifying them as such.

Conclusion: One ring to rule them all?

The signs and symbols denoting ‘the Jew’ were never abandoned over the centuries of intellectual and theological evolution in Germany. Rather, their applications were remoulded to suit the needs of the people employing these signifiers. When the requirement for distinguishing dress was included in canon 68 by Pope Innocent III, he included his reasoning for the requirement: the identification of Jews from Christians in this way is necessary to prevent ‘undesirable’ personal interactions. Later in the 15th century when Nicholas of Cusa attempted to enforce a yellow ring badge on German Jews, he made a reference in his ordinance to upholding the “sacred canons” but placed more emphasis on the discouragement of usury in connection to the badge, dropping the rationale from canon 68 and stitching it together with canon 67. Knowing that he had written of rings as signs of faith, using biblical Israel and her betrothal to God as supporting evidence, alongside his later conviction that all faiths would unite themselves with Christianity, the ring badge according to Cusa can be understood as a symbol of betrothal conferred on to the Jews. However, as Cusa’s ordinances were revoked and his time as legate came to a close, ideas about rings and faith continued to circulate in German-language preaching manuals. The *Gesta Romanorum*, first translated into German in 1489, presented the ring not as a promise of faith to be given to those on the borders, but instead as a sign of the rightful, faithful Christian.

Passing into the 16th century and nearing the Reformation in 1517, Lutheran reformers had mixed opinions on Jews and their place in a reformed Christianity. Martin Luther in his earlier career believed much like Cusa that the Jews could be shepherded into the faith, exercising the same paternalistic reasoning held by previous Catholic reformers. However, as the Protestant faith was established and provided a reformed alternative to Catholicism, Luther and his reformers soured on the Jews. They did not convert en masse to Protestantism, and to Protestant onlookers it appeared as if the theological ‘blindness’ of the Jews was not a result of a shared disdain for Catholic institutional corruption, but a genuine conviction in the Jewish faith. To Martin Luther, there was no more possibility of Jewish conversion and deliverance to Christ. For him, and certainly for printmakers like Peter Flötner, conversion was no longer the main strategy in dealing with the Jews; it had shifted to defeat of the ungodly enemy of Christian man. It coincided with the inclusion of section 22 of the *Polizeiordnung* of 1530, which instituted the *Judenring* as a matter of criminal law. In 1541, the Frankfurt city council drafted two copies of the *Judenring* and accompanying ordinance text for inclusion in the Frankfurt *Judenstätigkeit* and two years later in 1543, Martin Luther wrote *Von die Juden und Ihrer Lügen*. In his work, he stated that even if the Jews adopted all of the outward requirements made of them and practiced or participated in the ceremonies and rituals that would outwardly make them faithful and obedient, it would not correct the villainy within caused by the practice of idolatry and other evils.

There is a marked movement towards a determinist understanding of the Jews and their place in Christian society, where the boundaries between faithful and unfaithful are static. Images and poems like those in *Der Juden Erbarkeit* from 1571 further reinforce this idea, with the anonymous author claiming that the Jews’ god is ‘deception and finance. Here, Jews are again portrayed as existing outside the boundaries of Christian faith and morality, and that this immorality also manifests in their physical forms through disabilities, animal features, and the

presence of the *Judenring*. During this same time, efforts were underway to censor positive or pluralist perspectives that could lend sympathy to non-Christians. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* from the mid 14th century had maintained relevancy and popularity in literary circles, though by the 1570s the Catholic Church and other Christian authorities had listed it as a banned book, along with censoring any circulating copies of the collection. They made particular efforts to censor or entirely remove the story of Melchizedek and Saladin for the proposal that Judaism and Christianity, as well as Islam, could in fact have equal and legitimate claims as godly faiths. Only one ring could exist as a true sign and gift of faith.

Approaching the 17th century, the economic strife faced by the common people had continued to grow worse while already-wealthy patricians grew richer. In Frankfurt, the rising tension and struggle culminated in the Fettmilch uprising of 1614-16. In 1614, the Frankfurt city council reissued the *Judenstätigkeit*, which included the oath that Jews were compelled to swear in loyalty to the Protestant city and the *Judenring* regulation. The cover of the *Judenstätigkeit* cited Nicholas of Cusa for the origin of the *Judenring*, though it did not acknowledge the fall out of his ordinances or his philosophy. In the midst of this, broadsheets like *Der Juden Badstüb* (1615) were printed and showed Jews taking advantage of a Christian before ultimately turning him into a Jew himself, as shown by the appearance of a *Judenring* on the Christian. When the uprising in Frankfurt was eventually put down and the Jews were escorted back to their homes in 1616, the *Judenstätigkeit* was reissued the same year but with an acknowledgement of the uprising and the civilian-led expulsion of the Jews from the city. However, none of the ordinances within this reissued *Judenstätigkeit* were any different from the version issued two years prior. Two years later, the broadsheet *Meßkram von die Juden oder Jüdischer gelber Ring* (1618) was printed, a satirical answer to why the *Judenring* existed as a yellow ring. It shared much of its rhetoric with an Italian poem published a century prior,

which showed that the ideas about the symbolism of the *Judenring* had continued to spread over time and across empires.

The Thirty Years' War, and the physical and economic devastation it brought, represented a sort of peak in the religious fervour and violence of the 17th century. In the ensuing decades, Jews in some parts of the Holy Roman Empire were encouraged to stay in order to build the population and economy of the area back to its pre-war state. In this moment, Jews were considered to have an important function to German communities, though this is not a replacement for genuine toleration or acceptance into German Christian communities. By the 18th century, and just before the *Aufklärung* began in earnest, wealthier areas in the western part of the empire saw their Jews begin to unofficially forgo the badge. Slowly, this spread across the Holy Roman Empire, which was in its last century of existence. Rationalist ideas, along with the combination of humanist and scientific concepts, accommodated ideas of toleration. The Edict of Toleration in 1782 brought about the end of arcane traditions and requirements, the *Judenring* among them, in many regions of the German-speaking world. By 1812, the *Judenring* had ceased to exist in what was soon to become the German Federation.

When considering the history of the *Judenring* in its totality, the importance of the badge as a visual symbol and defining visual characteristic of the 'German Jew' cannot be understated. It was a symbol devised by the Christian understanding of faith and applied to what they considered to be a 'godless' people for the benefit of the Christian majority. It contributed to the othering of German Jews, regardless of wealth or proximity and investment in the Jewish faith. It had long-lasting influence on the German cultural and national conscience, as writers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe included mentions of it in *Zur Farbenlehre* (The Theory of Colours), one of his most popular and influential books from the 19th century:

When a yellow colour is communicated to dull and coarse surfaces, such as common cloth, felt, or the like, on which it does not appear with full energy, the disagreeable

effect alluded to is apparent. By a slight and scarcely perceptible change, the beautiful impression of fire and gold is transformed into one not undeserving the epithet foul; and the colour of honour and joy reversed to that of ignominy and aversion. To this impression the yellow hats of bankrupts and the yellow circles on the mantles of Jews, may have owed their origin.¹⁵²

What has remained in many of the 19th and early 20th century accounts of German medieval history, when they do refer to German Jews and the ordinances which were applied specifically to them that is, is a fascination with the colour of the badge. References to the colour yellow as the colour of the Jews appeared with any critical mention of the *Judenring*, and German historians sometimes referred to the badge as the *Judenfleck*, meaning Jewish stain.¹⁵³ In some ways, this semantic shift could point to an understanding that this badge was a stain on the Jews and therefore not an identifier that was willingly adopted by the Jews themselves.

In another, perhaps significantly darker sense, the use of the word ‘stain’ could imply that this badge and the institutions of discrimination against Jews have stained them, that is they have seeped into the fabric of German Jewry and are not easily removed as a sign of inherent difference from other Germans. References to the badge continued in the 20th century in German-language writing, largely in stories taking place or having to do with the late medieval and early modern period. In one particularly haunting piece of writing from February 1, 1932, a report on a speech made by Julius Streicher called “In der Rasse liegt die Schweine” (“The filth lies in the race”) in the *Ingölstadt Anzeiger* newspaper in Bavaria made the following observation:

With true obsession, Streicher then described the difference between the idealistic Aryan-Germanic race and the materialistic-Satanic race of the Jews. Everywhere in the world, the Jew appears: in governments, in political parties, in the press, even in

¹⁵² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake. John Murray (London: 1840) 178-179.

¹⁵³ See Zecharias Frankel, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. Verlag der Schletter'schen Buchhandlung (Breslau: 1867) 134-5.

fashion. No one who has listened to Streicher can doubt that the Jews bear sole responsibility for the current cold spell: they are doing this to further tear the friendly people apart and drive them into the arms of Bolsheviks.

Our ancestors were wiser: they placed the Jews under strict special laws and also marked them externally with the "Jewish mark" as merely tolerated.¹⁵⁴

A year after this was published, the "Non-Aryan Laws" were implemented in Nazi Germany as the first step towards legitimizing the difference between Aryan and Jew. Three years later, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in September of 1935. By 1941, any Jews remaining in Nazi Germany proper were forced to wear the yellow star badge, a practice which had been instituted as early as 1939 in Nazi-occupied and annexed territory. When German-Jewish legal historian Guido Kisch, himself a refugee living in the United States by 1935, wrote his article "The Yellow Badge in History" in 1942, he opened first with a reflection on the timeliness of the subject:

To a thoughtful observer it will appear, in all probability, as though the mediaeval oppressions and persecutions of the Jews have been extensively and carefully studied by experts in order to revive all the means and methods of by-gone days and to transform them into sharper-edged modern tools. In accomplishing this in a masterly manner the Nazis achieved their only trait of originality. Their modernization of mediaevalism shows an unprecedented refinement in force and mercilessness, in disregard for the established principles of law and morals, in complete non-recognition of individual human dignity... It is indeed a very refined resuscitation of one of the most harmful and objectionable regulations of mediaeval Jewry-law.¹⁵⁵

We cannot draw a straight line in German history from the badge in the medieval Holy Roman Empire to the implementation of the badge under the Third Reich. The conception of what the 'Jew' was, and what it meant to identify them, over the course of several hundred years was not a static process. However, we can see that the intellectual and religious evolution of the

¹⁵⁴ "In der Rasse liegt die Schweine" in *Ingölstadt Anzeiger*. Ingolstadt: February 1, 1932.

¹⁵⁵ Guido Kisch, "The Yellow Badge in History" in *Historiae Judaica* (New York: 1942) 96.

Judenring contributed and was weaponized with a high degree of efficacy in the modern age. The use of the Jewish badge, along with the rhetoric that accompanied the reason for its use, evolved from its malleable medieval origins to suit a world divided by modern, and supposedly immutable, boundaries of race.

Images and symbols, the messages they deliver to the viewer both implicit and explicit, drove and continue to drive the way that the surrounding world is interpreted. Symbols are a language to be learned and applied, facilitating the quick communication of ideas in the culture they exist in. The language itself is not necessarily static in the ideas and emotions that it could drive, but highly adaptable depending on the purpose for its use. The image of the badge, both in reality when worn by German Jews and in printed broadsheets and posters, signified not only the outward difference of the Jews but also the traits and behaviours that German Christians hated. It also meant that images and negative characteristics could be constructed around the appearance of the *Judenring*, and all of the elements would be rhetorically strengthened by the presence of the others. The badge was meant to differentiate the Jews under terms that Christians understood, allowing them to channel their negative understandings and associations with Jews onto a single symbol. While Jewish religious garb would have already acted as a way to differentiate Jews from Christians, the kippah or tzitzit were not for the benefit of the Christian viewer or authority. It was the opposite. These items were expressions of faith and belief in Judaism, not of shame or repentance. The badge was ultimately meant to exclude, to shame, and to tell the Christian viewer “*Here he is, the enemy of your spirit and the antithesis of who you are.*”

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