# JEWISH PERSECUTION AND MIMETIC RIVALRY IN THE IBERIAN KINGDOMS OF ARAGON AND CASTILE

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**ABSTRACT**

This article applies René Girard's mimetic theory to analyze the escalation of violence against Jews in the medieval Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It explores how economic, social, and religious factors fueled a mimetic crisis, leading to the scapegoating and eventual expulsion of Jews in 1492. The study highlights the importance of the "other" in constructing collective identities and scapegoats, particularly in the context of religious minorities like the Jews in medieval Iberia. Through Girard's framework, the analysis highlights the dynamics of mimetic desire and mediation, offering insights into the interplay of violence, identity, and power in medieval societies.

**Keywords:** mimetic theory; violence; medieval Iberia; scapegoating; mediation.

**RESUMO**

Este artículo aplica la teoría mimética de René Girard para analizar la escalada de violencia contra los judíos en los reinos medievales de Aragón y Castilla durante los siglos XIV y XV. Explora cómo factores económicos, sociales y religiosos alimentaron una crisis mimética, que condujo a la victimización y eventual expulsión de los judíos en 1492. El estudio resalta la importancia del «otro» en la construcción de identidades colectivas y chivos expiatorios, especialmente en el contexto de minorías religiosas como los judíos en la Iberia medieval. A través del marco de Girard, el análisis destaca las dinámicas del deseo mimético y la mediación, ofreciendo perspectivas sobre la interacción de la violencia, la identidad y el poder en las sociedades medievales.

**Palabras clave:** teoría mimética; violencia; Iberia medieval; chivos expiatorios; mediación.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the Iberian Peninsula were characterized by the mass expulsion and persecution of religious minorities, specifically the Jewish population. The times before this escalation of violence certainly cannot be described as a period of peaceful coexistence, or as it has been referred to as 'convivencia' (Castro, 1948: 17-24; Menocal, 2002). The communities had reciprocal relationships of differentiation that separated them from other cultural, religious, and ethnic groups (Glick & Pi-Sunyer, 1969: 53). Nevertheless, this coexistence was suddenly threatened by an abrupt mimetic crisis that was later perpetrated by the loss of religious segmentation that functioned as the primal method of differentiation. The purpose of the following essay is to utilize René Girard's mimetic theory in order to rethink the violent outbreak of the Iberian Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile that would subsequently lead to the Jewish expulsion of 1492.

## GIRARD'S APPROACH TO VIOLENCE

Let us start this analysis by remarking on the crucial element within René Girard's mimetic theory: violence. To Girard -in contrast to other moralist understandings- violence is much more common and natural in contrast to peace (Girard, 1977). It is in the study of violence that we find small periods of grace, and by no means is that a synonym to peace, it is simply periods of not-so-harmful violence, a tolerable violence that does not disrupt social order. These are the words that can best describe the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile prior to the Jewish Diaspora. As we should see during this article, these kingdoms were characterized by the existence of multi-ethnic and religious communities that coexisted in relatively peaceful terms but that nevertheless coincided in ritualized and controlled periods of violence.

Mimetic theory states that the primal institution of human coexistence -and destruction- is based upon our mimetic nature. We imitate each other to integrate into society. However, within this universe of mimetic relations, we also imitate harmful actions, most notoriously, desire. Imitating desire is dangerous because there are simply not enough physical and metaphysical objects to satisfy the needs of subjects. Examples such as sex, money, land,

and statuses such as prestige, honor, and popularity are always limited. This insufficiency of objects will lead inevitably to what Girard names as a "mimetic crisis" (Palaver, 2013: 136).

Communities have managed this mimetic crisis -a crisis that has the potential to completely eliminate and disintegrate the group- through one crucial method: the scapegoat mechanism. This mechanism implies that all the internal violence present within a specific community is redirected towards a "responsible" individual or individuals. This victim who in reality has no actual responsibility, absorbs the violent outbreak of the community and is sacrificed or removed, restoring peace and order into the rest of the group (Palaver, 2013: 4). This cyclical mimetic route can be described in the following order:

> i) violent mimetic disorder; ii) imitation to find a guilty subject, which begins the externalization process or self-externalization of violence; iii) lynching of that "exterior being, which can be a god or even an envious outcast"; iv) establishment of an order product of the miraculous sacrifice, which transforms the diabolical culprit murdered in a holy restorer of order; v) maintenance of order through positive imitations –i.e. prohibitions, mediators non-conflict, exchanges – and violent rituals that contain the violence; vi) erosion of order due to internal factors or failure of order by new external challenges.
> (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 77)

## MIMETIC RELATIONS IN THE IBERIAN KINGDOMS OF ARAGON AND CASTILE

When examining a crisis of a collective mimesis, the concern regarding the "other" stands as crucial and highly important in two reciprocal ways, first a model for constructing own identity in the sense that identity is composed in terms of the "other" and secondly, as the *de facto* figure to be blamed and configured as the scapegoat victim. Before the massive conversion of the Jewish population to Christianity, this distinction was quite clear. Even if the ethnic

and cultural peculiarities were blurred, religion functioned greatly as an element of differentiation:

> In the medieval Crown of Aragon, however, all violence between members of different religious groups was argued, or could potentially be argued, in explicitly religious terms. This is because religious status determined legal status, and both together determined what kinds of violence were appropriate and how such violence would be treated by the courts (…) The motives of participants, then, were not the most important factor in determining whether or not a given act of violence was "religious": their religious identity was.
> (Nirenberg, 2015: 31-32)

As stated earlier, the Jewish *convivencia* with their Christian hosts was far from perfect, nevertheless, the degree of violence that occurred during the final years of the fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth century was unprecedented. It is evident that a crisis was in full development through these centuries and that it was certainly not provoked by the Jewish community. With this in mind, what then were the causes? Why did these Iberian Kingdoms exponentially increase their violence towards the Jews and take the scapegoat mechanism to its most violent extension?

The answer to this paradigm could potentially be explained through a crisis shared among European states: the fourteenth century was simply a disastrous time in terms of economic prosperity and public health. If the black plague wasn't sufficient, the century represented the end of a period of constant growth into stagnation. The glory of the past was put to a sudden and violent stop, with the common people suffering the most dismal consequences:

> The previous three hundred years had been expansive ones during which European plows conquered new territories, agricultural productivity increased, trade recovered, and the population grew. By 1300, however, with little fertile earth land to find, agricultural yields (always appallingly low by modern standards) began to fall. A civilization that in previous century

> had effortlessly raised new cities, new cathedrals, new governments, came to weigh more and more heavily on this countryside.
> (Nirenberg, 2015: 18)

The Iberian Kingdoms were clearly not exempt from this harsh reality, the thirteenth century was not only characterized by notorious alimentary difficulties, but they also had to manage and sustain warlike conflicts that further neglected the kingdoms' ability for stabilization:

> Within this general European context the Crown of Aragon was in some way exceptional, in others riot. Like the rest of Europe, the Crown suffered from food shortages and famine (e.g., the "first bad year" of 1333, the "year of the great hunger" in 1347, the "bad year" of 1374), from plague, and from war. Some of these wars, like the eternal campaigns against Sardinia, were at least fought away from home. Other -for example, the long "War of the Two Peters", which broke out in 1356 between Peter the Ceremonious (1336-1387) of Catalonia-Aragon and Peter the Cruel (1350-1369) of Castile- were bloody and destructive affairs from which the Crown's economy took decades to recover. All these wars had one thing in common: they were expensive.
> (Nirenberg, 2015: 20)

With such a crisis in hand, the populace started to demand a responsible figure, thus the scapegoat mechanism began in its hunt for a propitiatory victim. The previous ritualized violence that fed this mechanism stopped being efficient, as described by David Nirenberg, the Holy Week was a period of days in which ritualized forms of Jewish persecution were permitted, such as sackings and wrecking of Jewish establishments, nevertheless, events like these proved to be not sufficient and the call for extended violence had increased. The propitiatory victim was again found within the Jewish population because they represented the major figure of otherness in terms of constructing Christian identities, they were the most different but at the same time, the most similar (Nirenberg, 2002: 13-14). A mimetic relation is

constructed in this same manner, two subjects or communities that imitate themselves concerning a shared and common object.

The Jews, as a community undeniably subordinated to a Christian elite, were consequently unable to respond to this violence using the same mechanisms of direct confrontation. Instead, they acted indirectly through the use of memory and narratives (Tavim, 2023; Biale, 1999; Ben-Shalom, 1999). Jewish "subversion" was channeled through texts now regarded as polemics, such as *Toledot Yeshu*, which openly parodies the Christian Gospel. Additionally, other narratives, like the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, depicted Jesus as a mortal who simply followed the word of God—essentially, a very Jewish portrayal of Jesus. (Tavim, 2023)

One might question why the Muslim population was not the primary target focus, and Girard offers an explanation to this dilemma. There isn't only one kind of mimetic relationship, in fact, subjects tend to have quite a stray of them, ranging from factors determined by proximity and antagonism. Girard maps out two sets of elements in observing a mimetic relation: internal/external and positive/negative. Internal positive mediation is best characterized by a certain degree of positive reciprocity, on non-conflicting identification or positive undifferentiation. Examples of this mediation can be seen in a subject's relationship to God, in a father and son bond, or in standard situations such as love relationships or friendship. On the other hand, internal negative mediation is characterized by envy, jealousy, and a deep desire to steal the other's identity. This type of mimetic bond is naturally the most dangerous as the distance between subjects enables a direct violent confrontation (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 48).

Positive external mediation has its primal element in the distance between subjects and leads to respect and admiration. Examples include role models, professors, monarchies, etc. These relations tend to be harmless because the distance among subjects is so large that the desiring subject creates a model to follow within the other subject, thus eliminating any possible rivalry. Finally, external negative mediation is constructed by dehumanization, the "other" can be the target of the worst atrocities or can simply be ignored. Nevertheless, it is important to mention to contingency of mimetic media-

tions: relations can quickly turn from positive to negative and from internal to external. This is due to what Girard describes as a "double bind", the difference between emulation and envy is just a change in attitude towards the goods of the other (Nirenberg, 2015: 27).

When observing the case of the Iberian Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile, it is clear that the mediation of Christians with Jews and Muslims was of a very different nature. The Jews were highly integrated within the governing bodies and power elites of the kingdoms. In that sense, they were the cultural group that stood in mostly similarities with the Christians and contributed to the monopoly of power which in Girard's terms can be described as a positive internal mediation:

> Just as Jews were more urban than Muslims, they were also more acculturated. One obvious index of this acculturation is language. Jews entered the Crown in a variety of ways: some emigrated from Muslim lands, others were conquered by Christian armies along with the Muslims, and still others came from elsewhere in Europe. Regardless of the provenance, however, all Jews in the Crown spoke the local Romance dialect as their language of everyday life, even if many retained Hebrew and Arabic as languages of religion and learning. Jewish social structure also approximated Christian models more than the Muslim one did. Jews, for example, modeled their society on the Christian division into upper, middle, and lower classes, and conflict among these classes was an important source of social unrest. (Nirenberg, 2015: 27)

This integration, or a certain level of compatibility, is also reflected in the official Christian perspective on the Jews. While they were regarded as heretics, they were simultaneously seen as "witnesses" to the truth of the Christian faith. This view positioned the Jews as a community that, although aware of Christ's message, chose to reject it. At the same time, they were recognized for preserving the original scriptures, specifically the Hebrew Bible, which affirmed the authenticity of the Christian message. The Muslims on the contrary were viewed as authentic "enemies of the faith" (Roth, 2002: 18).

Not only were Jews fully integrated with the Christian majorities, but they also represented a strong financial asset (Lowney, 2005: 201; Pérez, 2013: 182). The relationship among these two cultural groups was of mutual benefit based on a strict economic basis:

> Though there were some great lords who were allowed by the king to have Jewish vassals, the great majority of Jews depended directly on the king. This resulted in a close relationship between Crown and Jews. Jews paid the king taxes, taxes that came to represent an important fraction of the funds available to him. Jews also served the royal court as administrators, physicians, ambassadors, translators, as well as in a variety of other capacities. In exchange, they were closely subject to the jurisdiction of the royal official and depended on royal authority for protection.
> (Nirenberg, 2015: 28)

In contrast, the Muslim population did not share the same benefits or an integration to the extent of the Jews. This meant that their mediation could be described as external and negative, the distance shared between them, and Christians was so great that their relationship shifted between indifference to violence. The nature of this mimetic mediation between Christians and Muslims could potentially explain the evocation of a lack of assimilation among these two cultures that would eventually motivate the expulsion of Moors from the Iberian Kingdoms during the 17th century (Roth, 2009: 18).

A crisis of the magnitude experimented during the fourteenth century on the contrary, demanded a scapegoat victim that actually possessed a certain degree of power, the sacrifice needed to be sufficient to appease the gods. This growing hostility towards the Jews also reflected the "new missionizing" anti-Jewish campaign inspired directly from Rome, specifically from Pope Nicholas III and preached notoriously through the Dominican and Franciscan orders (Roth 2009: 18; Baer 1961: 167, 188). These orders had close ties to the monarchs and consequently exercised a certain degree of moral authority, thus obtaining support for the missionary activities and contributing directly to the rioting and violence against the Jews. (Roth, 2009: 18; Pérez, 2013: 182).

Returning to Girard's notion of double bind, this is a primal example of such a concept, the Jewish community quickly transformed its status from a positive internal mediation to a negative one. From a tolerated coexistence to direct percussion.

## BLURRED DIFFERENTIATION AND THE SEARCH FOR SCAPEGOATS

As stated before, a mimetic crisis is characterized by an intense stage of mimetic desire towards an object that leads to a loss of social differences. That is the social differences that guarantee the barriers that divide society and canalize violence into specific constituencies, such as the Holy Week. When this stage of mimetic crisis exploded, the barriers that separated the Christians from the Jews in their mutually beneficial bond and that indirectly contributed to peace among these groups were consequently broken and violence escaped to create a new hostile environment of persecution and expulsion. Nirenberg was also quick to point out the contingency and fragility of these types of relations among religious entities in which the economic factor was highly crucial:

> None of these relations need preclude violence or hatred. If anything, post-Enlightment social theorist have been too sanguine about the integratory potential of economic relations. As Durkheim put it: "Interest never unite men but for a few moments, contracts are mere truces in continuing antagonism. Nothing is less constant than interest. Today it unites me to you; tomorrow, it will make me your enemy". Nevertheless, these "economic foundations of convivencia" should remind us that the violence detailed in the following chapters was not directed at strangers or at economically marginal groups occupying insignificant niches in local economies. Attacker and victim alike were tightly bound in a wide variety of relations that emmeshed moments of violence and gave them meaning.
> (Nirenberg, 2015: 40)

This shared and desired object can also be understood from this economic perspective, the growing influence and integration of the Jewish population

into the bureaucracy of Aragon and Castile threatened wealth concentration that was previously shared most notoriously between the Christian governing and ruling elites. An economic crisis is sufficient to potentiate rivalries between those that desire the same benefits and positions of power (Pérez, 2013: 182). The integration of the Jews into the bureaucracy naturally also increased the level of competition among servants of the crown, while in the lower classes, economic stagnation increased tension among religiously antagonist groups.

> This turn to lineage may well have been a reaction to the much more competitive landscape confronting Old Christians as the floodwaters of baptism receded, for the converts took advantage of many opportunities that had been forbidden to them as Jews. To give but one Aragonese example, Fernando de la Cavalleri´a, a prominent Jew of Zaragoza, emerged from the baptismal font in 1414 to occupy the position of royal treasurer, one of the most important in the court. Two of his kindred baptized with him ascended to only slightly less prestigious posts; all three had offices forbidden to Jews in the Crown of Aragon since the late thirteenth century. In Castile, Jewish access to positions in the world of royal finance endured longer, but conversion nevertheless opened entirely new avenues for office-holding and advancement.
> (Nirenberg, 2002: 22)

Expulsion and conversion became the two main strategies by which the Iberian Kingdoms hoped to pacify the violence inherent to a crisis. While expulsion is a clear example of the scapegoat mechanism, mass conversions functioned in detriment towards the effectivity of such mechanism. A crucial element in selecting a scapegoat is that there must exist a certain degree of consensus, unanimity about the responsibility of the propitiatory victim. In this sense, it's not only about selecting a specific target, but the masses also have to believe the victim is actually responsible. Without a high degree of unanimity, the "sacrifice" loses its effectiveness. Jews primarily occupied this position as propitiatory victims although the lines that separated them from

their Christian companions were increasingly becoming blurred because of their relatively close coexistence:

> But there is no doubt that they were all very much concerned by the ways in which the existence of a group of Christians living in proximity (social, cultural, and physical) to Jews undercut the radical distinction between the two groups, a distinction believed to be crucial to the identity of both communities. In the words of St Vincent himself, 'he will never be a good Christian, who is neighbour to a Jew'. Proximity destabilized an essential aspect of Christian identity, dishonoured God, and put Christian society at risk of famine, plague, and other manifestations of divine displeasure. Equally dangerous was the fact that it made accurate identification difficult. (Nirenberg, 2002: 11)

The first important example of the explosion of the scapegoat mechanism and the unprecedented attack on Jewish communities was the pogroms of 1391. Even though this event is considered the worst attack against Jews until that point, some authors have pointed out how this episode of violence was relatively minor. It was mostly characterized by robbing, looting, conversions, and obviously murder, but the complete elimination of Jewish communities is not documented (Lea, 1896: 216). The mimetic crisis had not yet invaded the governing bodies, they openly sought to end the riots and punish the attackers, considering the Jews as allies and servants of the crown (Roth, 2002: 11).

Mass conversion consequently only worsened and extended the blurring of these elements of differentiation, the archetype of converting communities into a single and uniform population created an unforeseen problem, the major element of distinction was now compromised. By blurring religious peculiarities in the context of an era where identity was mostly constructed by theological beliefs, the Iberian Kingdoms had unconsciously strained their notion of the "other" and neglected the necessary figure to materialize the scapegoat mechanism in order to control the mimetically generated violence of the time.

By this logic, it is no surprise that genealogical interests and lineage narratives started to occupy an important role in the construction of identities. The emphasis on lineage and genealogy was nothing more than the search for a new victim to materialize the scapegoat mechanism and to distinguish the victim from the perpetrator, an attempt to construct unanimity over the responsibility of the victims. This emphasis on genealogical narratives was further perpetuated by the Franciscan and Dominican orders. In their efforts to "unblur" these lines, they began to attack, and label converts as false Christians—individuals who secretly continued to practice their Jewish faith and rituals (Pérez, 2013: 182; Roth, 2002: 14,17).

The shift from a certain degree of unanimity over the responsibility of the victim to a blurring of lines distinguishing potential victims would only increase the levels of violence as the mechanism transfers from a single victim to a multiplicity of victims. The scapegoat mechanism is constructed on the basis of consensus, so when there is no clarity over the selected subject, violence is never pacified, on the contrary, it increases exponentially (Márquez Muñoz, 2020: 76). If we observe the overall tendencies of the Jewish persecution at the end of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth, it is clear we can only speak in terms of increment.

As noted by Norman Roth in *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain,* the pogroms of 1391 against the Jews were incomparable to what was to come in the following century. He describes the pogroms as "minor in scope and were caused by a small minority of lower-class gangsters who saw an opportunity to rob and vent their general frustration on the relatively defenseless Jews" (Roth, 2002: 115). This description can be seen as an escalation of the ritualized violence against the Jews described by Nirenberg. It was an episode to relatively minor infuriated masses and perfectly describes the scapegoat mechanism. On the contrary, once the scapegoat had suffered the loss of unanimity as the result of mass conversions, the fifteenth century erupted in full violence against the Jews. This persecution was characterized by the full scale of war:

> The anti-converso riots were organized and were massive, actual battles using sophisticated weapons and machinery of war (…) The instigators in this case were certainly not, as Baer has claimed, "lower class," but on the contrary, bureaucrats and officials, bishops (Toledo and Cordoba) and nobility. The motives were chiefly, if not entirely, jealousy of the wealth and power of the conversos. Both Alonso de Palencia and Fernando de Pulgar, conversos whose devout Christianity was above suspicion, concur in the hypocrisy of the changes of "heresy" trumped up against conversos in general.
> (Roth, 2002: 115)

In this escalation, the direct intervention of the power elites and the governing bodies can now be observed. The mimetic crisis that had commenced among the lower classes, that is, the first ones to suffer the natural consequences of economic stagnation, had now spread upwards to the ruling elites, and the whole state apparatus now participated in perpetuating violence. This change in power dynamics in result made the Jewish persecution much more violent and can be a good explanation of the change of attitude. Mimetic desire was spread within the royal bureaucracies which under that position of power was a synonym of war.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to analyze the escalation of violence towards the Jewish population in the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries utilizing René Girard's mimetic theory. With this particular framework, it has become clear that the sudden alteration of the Christian attitude towards the Jews and the consequent rise of institutional violence was the natural result of an economic crisis that struck the European continent during the time. Thus, it generated an internal mimetic crisis in Iberia that already had a preestablished religious group as the primal figure of their scapegoat mechanism and therefore exploited such mechanism to its maximum extent.

The Jewish population, in contrast to the Muslim population, was naturally positioned as the greatest mimetic rival of the ruling and majority Christian community. This was because those mentioned had known how to integrate into the state bureaucracy as well as assimilate the greatest cultural practices and customs. This meant that the Jews not only got along better with the Christian population, but they came to occupy positions of authentic power and also obtain economic prosperity that benefited the kingdom itself, creating a strategic relationship of mutual benefit between these two groups.

However, it is important to clarify that despite this coexistence based on economic principles, the Jews already represented the primary figure of the expiatory mechanism within their context. As seen through Nirenberg's work, there were already precedents that demonstrated a certain amount of ritualized violence toward Jews. However, this violence that we could describe as institutionalized and controlled, proved insufficient in the face of a new reality of generalized crisis that did not exist previously. This led to an escalation of mimetic violence towards the Jewish population, as was demonstrated in 1391 and in subsequent attacks as an attempt to pacify the crisis. These attempts, however, proved to be insufficient and violence continued to increase into the 15th century. This crisis was also worsened by another attempt at pacification: the massive conversion to Christianity.

This last strategy, far from reconciling the state of violence, served to distort the effectiveness of the scapegoat mechanism by breaking the concept of unanimity and generating confusion about the guilt of the alleged perpetrators. By now, the mimetic crisis had already invaded the ruling classes and those in power. This meant that the entire state apparatus was part of the persecution of the Jewish people and, as a maximum consequence, led to their subsequent expulsion in 1492.

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