

Presenter: Robert Chazan, New York University

Title: **“The Medieval Transition from Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism”**

Panel: Bible, Christianity and Anti-Semitism

It seems clear to many observers that Christianity provided some of the grounding for modern antisemitism. The Gospels portray Jesus' Jewish contemporaries in very negative terms, and many of the Church Fathers wrote disparagingly of Judaism and Jews. Yet the picture is more complex. At the same time, major early Christian thinkers, for example Paul and Augustine, expressed high regard for early Judaism and Jews and thus laid the grounds for Church policies that recognized the rights of Jews to live safely and securely in Christian societies.

The distinction between the Church's negativity and modern hatred of Jews is often portrayed through the terms anti-Judaism and antisemitism, with a sense that there are continuities but at the same time radical differences between the two. Anti-Judaism is projected as theological—the conviction that Christianity represents religious truth and that Judaism is steeped in error. Antisemitism, on the other hand, is seen as denigration of Jews that moves beyond the realm of religion, culminating in the conviction that Jews pose serious danger to the societies within which they are embedded. A number of medievalists have begun to suggest that medieval northern Europe developed new perspectives on Judaism and Jews that served as a point of transition between anti-Judaism and antisemitism.

At the core of this innovative stage in Christian anti-Jewish thinking lay the emergence of a new period in European history and in Jewish history. Toward the end of the first millennium, northern Europe was vitalized and began its ascendance to leadership in the West. A by-product of this vitalization was the attraction for the first time of Jews. These small Jewish enclaves grew steadily and eventually became the dominant element in modern Jewry. The young Jewish communities of northern Europe encountered considerable popular resistance, were as a result deformed to an extent economically, and elicited by the twelfth century new perceptions of Judaism and Jews. Traditional Christian thinking projected Jews as theologically

obtuse, which had led Jesus' Jewish contemporaries to oppose them. The new perceptions spawned by the innovative circumstances of northern Europe and northern-European Jewry projected contemporary Jews as intensely hostile to Christianity and Christians, desirous of inflicting harm whenever possible. This transformed the Jews from theological rivals to a serious societal danger. In these new perceptions lay the kernel of modern antisemitic thinking and its demonization of Jews as a profound danger to Western societies.