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Renaissance Racism: Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) as an Exception

Rasizm w epoce Renesansu.

Wyjątkowa postawa Johanna Reuchlina (1455–1522)

ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Reuchlin's success in saving the Jewish books from destruction was even more significant than is usually accredited by historians. His struggle to preserve the Talmud and other Jewish books was conducted within a society infected with racism, mainly racial anti-Semitism, a phenomenon barely recognized and mostly denied by scholars of medieval and early-modern Europe. The paper sketches the basics of this racism. Although Reuchlin was unaware of the racial meaning of his defense of the Jews, one may nevertheless think of him as a Martin Luther King fighting racial discrimination against a defined minority. The 500th anniversary of Reuchlin's death, to be marked in the summer of 2022, is an excellent opportunity to celebrate his exceptional conception of the Jews, essentially of humankind, in 16th century Europe.

KEY WORDS: Renaissance racism, Johannes Reuchlin, Talmud, anti-Semitism, fight against racial discrimination

ABSTRAKT: Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą udowodnienia, że sukces Reuchlina w ratowaniu żydowskich ksiąg przed zniszczeniem był większej wagi, niż zwykle przypisują mu historycy. Walka Reuchlina o zachowanie Talmudu i innych żydowskich ksiąg toczyła się w społeczeństwie dotkniętym rasizmem, głównie antysemityzmem rasowym, zjawiskiem słabo rozpoznany i najczęściej negowanym przez badaczy średniowiecznej i wczesnonowożytnej Europy. Podstawy tego rasizmu zostały zarysowane w artykule. Choć Reuchlin nie zdawał sobie sprawy ze znaczenia swojej obrony Żydów z perspektywy walki z rasizmem, można jednak myśleć o nim jak o Martinie Lutherze Kingu walczącym z dyskryminacją rasową wobec określonej mniejszości. Pięćsetna rocznica śmierci Reuchlina, która przypadnie latem 2022 roku, jest doskonałą okazją do uczczenia stworzenia przez niego wyjątkowej koncepcji Żydów, a w gruncie rzeczy ludzkości, w XVI-wiecznej Europie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: renesansowy rasizm, Johannes Reuchlin, Talmud, antysemityzm, walka z dyskryminacją rasową

Introduction

Johannes Reuchlin was a prominent humanist and Hebraist and one of the first Christians to compose and publish a Hebrew textbook and lexicon, which he titled *The Basic Principles of the Hebrew Language* (*De rudimentis hebraicis* 1506). Reuchlin also won fame due to his Kabbalistic works *On the Wonder-working Word* (*De verbo mirifico* 1494) and *The Practices of the Kabbalah* (*De arte cabalistica* 1517), which were based on his study of Hebrew writings. He was the first to profoundly study the Jewish Kabbalah in an attempt to create a Christian-Catholic Kabbalah.¹ Besides being an eminent scholar, Reuchlin deserves appreciation for his outstanding role in the polemical and toxic controversy known as ‘the Reuchlin affair’ or ‘the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin affair.’² Johannes Pfefferkorn (1469–1523) was the infamous convert from Judaism to Christianity who plotted to confiscate and burn the books of the Jews in the Holy Roman Empire. In his struggle to save the books, the Talmud above all, from this planned destruction, and subsequently to defend himself from the grave accusations that his actions drew upon him, Reuchlin impressively succeeded in arousing public opinion in Germany and beyond to support his case and oppose his persecutors. This achievement as well as his scholarship had far-reaching implications in creating “a context for a favorable reception

¹ Cf. F. Posset, *Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522): A Theological Biography*, serie: *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 129, Berlin–Boston 2015, pp. 4–5, 95–98, 122–154; *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books in Sixteenth-Century Germany: Johannes Reuchlin’s Augenspiegel*, D. O’Callaghan (ed. and transl.), serie: *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions* 163/2, Leiden–Boston 2013, pp. 82–85.

² On the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin affair, see: H.A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, transl. J.I. Porter, Philadelphia 1984, pp. 25–37; H.A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation*, Grand Rapids 1994, pp. 103, 157–160; E. Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation*, Cambridge MS 1995, pp. 87–89; E. Rummel, *The Case Against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, Toronto 2002; E. Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750*, New Haven–London 2001, pp. 52–53; D.H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*, Oxford 2010; M. Diemling, *Historical Introduction*, [in:] J. Pfefferkorn, *The Jew’s Mirror* (*Der Juden Spiegel*), transl. R.I. Cape, serie: *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, Binghamton 2011, pp. 7–32; A. Shamir, *Christian Conceptions of Jewish Books: The Pfefferkorn Affair*, Copenhagen 2011; *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books...*, op. cit., pp. 49–69, 91–96.

of the early Reformation movement.”³ It also testifies to Reuchlin’s success as a publicly involved intellectual, which his philosemitic engagement in public issues makes even more exceptional. He struggled within a society infected with racism, mainly racial anti-Semitism, a phenomenon barely recognized and mostly denied by scholars of Renaissance Europe. The basics of this racism are sketched in the following lines. Although he was unaware of the racial aspect attached to his defense of the Jews, one may think of Reuchlin as a Martin Luther King fighting for the human rights of an oppressed minority. The 500th anniversary of Reuchlin’s death, to be marked in the summer of 2022, is an excellent opportunity to point to his exceptional conception of the Jews, essentially of humankind, in early-modern Europe.

Renaissance racism

Reuchlin’s *Eye Glasses* (*Augenspiegel*), a polemic published in 1511, argued against the intentions of the authorities to burn the Talmud and other Jewish books. In his translation, Daniel O’Callaghan remarks (my emphasis):

A problem arises in modern translations with the German term ‘Juden’ (Jews) in its application to sixteenth-century texts. It is often used as if it referred to a race as much as it does to a religious community, but how the term was understood by individuals can only be speculated upon, as **the concept of race as understood today hardly existed**. The source of the word is rooted in a literal and theological interpretation of the Bible, with both being given different levels of emphasis. **Here and throughout the entire book, it is intended to mean those of Jewish persuasion.**⁴

O’Callaghan’s judgment is both wrong and right. Indeed, Reuchlin’s conception of the Jews was far from racist and, therefore, to conceive his “Juden” as *those of Jewish persuasion* is correct. However, Reuchlin was the exception that proved the rule. Racism did exist in 16th-century Europe. A considerable number of studies deal with Medieval discourses that articulate racial identities for Jews and Muslims. In contrast to the older commonplace that racism did not exist prior to the development of nationalism and modern biology, the existence of

³ D. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin...*, op. cit., p. 174.

⁴ *The Preservation of Jewish Religious...*, p. 105, note 3.

a Medieval and early-modern racial status that functions like and anticipates modern racism has been convincingly argued.⁵

For sure, one cannot point to the existence of an explicit Renaissance theory of racism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest evidence for the term's usage stems from 1880 and 1902.⁶ Nevertheless, racism as a historical phenomenon dates back to much earlier periods. Indications of racism in 16th-century European society certainly do exist. Before explicitly referring to them, however, here is the definition of racism that I use:

an idea, or set of ideas, and an ideology. In other words, the essential difference between racism and other forms of prejudice and chauvinism is that the characteristics of the other are determined by nature while the latter attributes them to custom, social forces or education and the like. The former unlike the latter thus claim that characteristics are unalterable and passed on from one generation to the next.⁷

Besides its clarity, I chose this particular definition because of its reductiveness. In contrast to definitions that tend to conceptualize racism as linked to a broad spectrum of non-somatic attributes, the above definition leaves only a narrow window for the researcher to test his findings against. In other words, it constitutes a much more challenging and demanding scholarly exertion.

The way converts from Judaism to Christianity were perceived by Christian society indicates the existence of racism in 16th-century Europe. Although Jews had an option of conversion to Christianity, in practice converts from Judaism to Christianity were rated as of lower status than other Christians. Researchers who have studied conversions of Jews to Christianity have concluded that Jews who converted to Christianity were considered inferior because of their background or their immutable inherent qualities; it was supposed that their essence did not change, and they were not considered Christians but baptized Jews.⁸ Accordingly, European converts from Judaism were not admitted as real

⁵ Cf. G. Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018; M.L. Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*, Oxford 2019; C.J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*, Philadelphia 2019.

⁶ Cf. W.D. Hund, S. Affeldt, 'Racism' Down Under: *The Prehistory of a Concept in Australia*, "Australian Studies Journal" 33/34 (2019/2020), pp. 9–30 (especially 12).

⁷ M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac, J. Ziegler, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Origins of Racism in the West*, M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac, J. Ziegler (eds.), Cambridge–New York 2009, p. 12.

⁸ Cf. R. Po-chia Hsia, *Religion and Race: Protestant and Catholic Discourses on Jewish Conversion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, [in:] *The Origins of Racism...*, op. cit.,

or full Christians and were religiously and socially discriminated against. In particular, *conversos* in Spain were never legally equal to Spanish Christians and were harshly marginalized and persecuted.⁹ Converts from Judaism were regarded as baptized Jews, half-Jews half-Christians, by race Jews but in religion Christians.¹⁰ Jewish origin did not vanish, even when a Jew was no longer a Jew.

The well-known convert Victor of Carben (ca. 1423–1515), a Rabbi turned Christian, described some of the agonies facing the convert:

A Jew who has recently become a Christian deserves compassion. Getting used to things is always hard, and it is also difficult to forget your past – friends and comrades with whom you spent much time and who were your school fellows, not to speak of the possessions you left behind.¹¹

Carben also hints at the way these converts are perceived by “full Christians”:

Many are of the opinion that it is next to impossible for an ex-Jew to become a good and faithful Christian. And I don't deny that this is sometimes the case, but conversely it often happens that Jews become very good Christians and remain so to the end of their lives.¹²

pp. 265–275 (especially 266, 271); E. Carlebach, *Divided Souls...*, op. cit., pp. 35–37. For a lucid summary of the subject, see: J. Adams, C. 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*, J. Adams, C. Heß (eds.), Berlin–Boston 2017, pp. 12–14.

⁹ On the status and position of the *conversos*, see: K. Ingram, *Introduction*, [in:] *Medieval Spain and Beyond*, vol. 1: *Departures and Change*, K. Ingram (ed.), serie: *Studies in Medieval & Reformation Traditions* 141, Leiden 2009, pp. 3–6. An emphasis on the hybridity of *conversos* identities is found in D. Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, New York–London 2013, pp. 222–229; D. Nirenberg, *Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jews and Christians in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, “Past & Present” 174/1 (2002), pp. 3–41 (especially 13–18).

¹⁰ Cf. N. Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples*, New York 2019, pp. 147–160.

¹¹ V. de Carben, *De vita et moribus Iudeorum* [*The Life and Customs of the Jews*]. An enlarged version of the book was published under the title *Opus Aureum ac Nouum in quo Omnes Iudeorum Errores Manifestantur* [*The Golden and New Work in which all the Errors of the Jews are Manifested*], Coloniae 1509, caput 4: “*Compatiendum hinc potius est hominibus ex iudeis Christianis nuper factis quod difficile sit in omni re primum assuescere atque oblivisci interea eorum omnium et amicorum et sociorum quibuscum antea diu versati fuisti simulque educati. Taceo immo etiam ad mentem revocare bona quae ob Christi fidem postegerunt.*”

¹² V. de Carben, *De vita et moribus Iudeorum...*, op. cit., caput 4: “*licet plurimi in ea sententia sint ut arbitrentur id ferme impossibile ex veterano utpote iudeo fieri christianum bonum*

Here are a few more cases in point. The plot to burn the books of the Jews aroused a harsh controversy. Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523) and his co-authors of *Letters of Obscure Men* (*Epistolae obscurorum virorum* 1515) viciously attacked the convert Pfefferkorn and his Dominican partners. The work they composed consisted of fabricated letters full of venom cast at their enemies.¹³ Moreover, it is replete with what can only be considered racism. Franz Posset has observed:

The Reuchlinists, particularly the authors of the notorious, fictitious *Letters of Obscure Men*... are responsible for spreading the negative image of Pfefferkorn after 1515. Some of Pfefferkorn's detractors portrayed him as a Christian in name only, and in doing so exposed themselves as racists: just as an animal cannot change its nature, a Jew cannot change his, and even if you boil a rock in water for three days, the rock will never be cooked.¹⁴

The Christian perception of converts from Judaism – once a Jew, always a Jew – is recounted by Martin Luther and enlightened by Thomas Kaufman. The story

fidelem. Id haud inficior plerumque evenire sed et illud compertum sepe est ex iudeis optimos factos christianos qui et in finem usque vitae se tales permanserint." I am indebted to Professor Erika Rummel for providing me Carben's Latin text and for allowing me to use excerpts of Carben's work that she translated. On Victor of Carben, see: M. Diemling, *The image of women in the writings of Victor of Carben*, "Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies" (July 29–August 5, 1997), pp. 91–100; M. Diemling, *Navigating Christian Space: Jewish responses to Christian Imagery in Early Modern German Lands*, [in:] *Visualizing Jews Through the Ages: Literary and Material Representations of Jewishness and Judaism*, H. Ewence, H. Spurling (eds.), New York–London 2015, pp. 266–299; E. Carlebach, *Divided Souls...*, pp. 27, 36, 177–179, 182–185; G. Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity*, Leiden 2008, pp. 171–172; Y. Deutsch, *Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 2012, pp. 25, 94, 234–235, 239 note 42.

¹³ The fictional letters (Ulrich von Hutten, *Epistolae obscurorum virorum*) appeared as a supplement to von Hutten's works, edited and published by E. Böcking: Ulrich von Hutten, *Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia*, E. Böcking (ed.), vols. 1–5, Leipsic 1859–1862; F.G. Stokes, *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum: The Latin Text with an English Rendering, Notes, and a Historical Introduction*, London 1909; U. von Hutten et al., *On the Eve of Reformation: Letters of Obscure Men*, transl. F. Griffin Stokes, New York 1964.

¹⁴ F. Posset, *In Search of the Historical Pfefferkorn: The Missionary to the Jews, 1507–1508*, [in:] *Revealing the Secrets...*, op. cit., p. 46. The reference is to epistle 2 of the *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* (F.G. Stokes, *On the Eve of the Revolution*, New York 1964, p. 47); F. Posset, *Johann Reuchlin...*, op. cit., p. 584. Pfefferkorn was no outsider to Christianity, and considered himself an authentic and legitimate Christian, and of deep spirituality; see: D.H. Price, *Johannes Pfefferkorn and Imperial Politics*, [in:] *Revealing the Secrets...*, op. cit., pp. 27–41 (especially 39).

is told that a convert from Judaism became a deacon in Cologne. When he died, cat and mouse images were put on his grave to indicate that a cat cannot turn into a mouse and vice versa: the Jew cannot become a Christian, even by converting to Christianity.¹⁵ This story, as well as others, demonstrates a conception that Luther shared with many. Thomas Kaufman and Lyndal Roper have thoroughly dealt with Luther's racism (that is, his racial anti-Semitism).¹⁶ Here is a reminder. Roper illuminated the issue based not only on Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* (*Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* 1543) but on his much less known and often overlooked *On the Ineffable Name and the Generations of Christ* (*Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* 1543). She writes:

Some have argued that Luther was concerned not with the Jews as an ethnic group, but as a religious challenge, whose conversion was required before the Last Days could arrive. By the 1530s, however, Luther was not interested in converting the Jews – if he ever had been, for as Thomas Kaufmann has pointed out, he certainly never made a serious effort to evangelize them. Indeed, he opens his 1543 treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* insisting 'Much less do I propose to convert the Jews, for that is impossible'. And *Von Schem Hamphoras* too begins by explaining that he has no interest in converting the Jews because converting them 'is as little possible as converting the Devil' and a 'Jewish heart is as stock, stone, iron, Devil hard that it is not to be moved in any way' – only to end the work by insisting that he would have 'nothing more to do with the Jews'. If any do wish to convert, he writes, 'may God give them his grace, that they (even some) might recognize and praise God the Father, our creator, together with our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit forever, Amen'. They must become, in a sense, true 'Jews', because as Luther states in the previous paragraph, the Jews of today do not know Moses and the Bible, 'so shamefully have they dirtied him with their Judas piss'... In fact, converted Jews were a byword for perfidiousness with Luther. Time and again in the *Table Talk* he and his companions told stories about Jews who apparently converted but then apostatized, and he even joked

¹⁵ Cf. writings of Martin Luther in: *Weimar Ausgabe*, Weimar 1883–1929, Ab. 1, Bd. 47: *Reihenpredigten über Johannes 3-4 und Matthäus*, no. 18–24 1537/40, p. 466, lines 20–24; Ab. 2, Bd. 1: *Tischreden aus den Jahren 1540–1544*, no. 5354, lines 16–18, no. 7038. See also: T. Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, transl. L. Sharpe, J. Noakes, Oxford 2017, p. 56 and note 5.

¹⁶ Cf. T. Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews...*, op. cit.; T. Kaufmann, *Luther and the Jews*, "Antisemitism Studies" 3/1 (2019), pp. 46–65; L. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, New York 2016, pp. 378–386; L. Roper, 'Living I Was Your Plague': *Martin Luther's World and Legacy*, Princeton–Oxford 2021, pp. 135–168.

that 'If I get another pious Jew to baptize, I'll take him to the Elbe bridge and hang a stone around his neck and throw him in the river' so that he might die before relinquishing Christianity.¹⁷

In fact, long before Kaufman and Roper, Heiko Oberman had identified Luther's racial anti-Semitism. Moreover, he considered both Luther and Erasmus as forerunners of modern anti-Semitism.¹⁸

Although differing from Luther in style and tone, Desiderius Erasmus, the most outstanding humanist, perceived converts similarly to Luther. Thus, the convert Johannes Pfefferkorn was regarded by Erasmus as half-Jew, half-Christian. Mathew Adrian (Matthaeus Adrianus, documented 1501–1521), a convert and eminent scholar, was perceived by Erasmus as "by race a Jew but in religion a Christian."¹⁹

The following is a significant case in point. Erasmus and Girolamo Aleandro (1480–1542) were friends until Erasmus suspected the Cardinal of conspiring against him. Erasmus responded by smearing him as a "Jew." He wrote anonymously against Aleandro:

In these days, Jerome Aleandro arrived, a most important man according to himself, not only due to his excellent knowledge of languages, of which Hebrew is his vernacular one [...]. He was born to a Jewish family that took unrestrained pride in a pedigree that went back to Abraham. Was he really baptized? I do not know. It is certain that he is no Pharisee, because he does not believe in the resurrection of the dead, since he also lives just as if his body is about to completely perish. Therefore he does not abstain from any unworthy fondness. He used to get angry up to insanity, and got extremely enthusiastic on occasions. He displayed the arrogance of an impotent, an unlimited avarice, an abominable and unrestrained libido, total slave of glory [...]. But in some way which is unknown to us, his dissimulated defection to live among Christians was successful. In this way he magnified his Moses and diminished Christ's glory, which had only just begun to flower again, while the prejudices and fatal rituals made by men had begun to fade.²⁰

¹⁷ L. Roper, *Living I Was Your Plague'...*, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁸ Cf. H.A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism...*, op. cit., pp. 25, 38–39; H.A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation*, op. cit., pp. 103, 164.

¹⁹ N. Ron, *Erasmus and the "Other"...*, op. cit., p. 153 note 23.

²⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmii Opuscula: A Supplement to the Opera Omnia*, W.K. Ferguson (ed.), New York 2013 (originally printed 1933), pp. 316–317 (lines 2–20); Desiderius Erasmus,

Aleandro, Jewish by birth, masquerading and pretending to be a Christian, is exposed by Erasmus, who continues his slander:

[...] general rumors as well as Aleandro's whole appearance and manner of speaking, and his faith, clearly testified that he is a Jew, and the Jews themselves knew that. The Christians are condemned to suffer from the Jews. So it was a Jew who goaded Pope Julian [II] to destroy the universe. It was Pfefferkorn in Cologne who stirred up the Christian world. And now it is Aleandro, the cousin of Judas, who is surpassing his ancestors, ready to sell the cause of the gospels even for three drachma.²¹

Whether or not Erasmus was misled by a malicious rumor concerning Aleandro's Jewish origin is beside the point. Erasmus' blunt anti-Jewish attitude – anti-Semitic, according to certain researchers – is clearly expressed here. The hardcore of this racialization is: "...Aleandro's whole appearance and manner of speaking, and faith clearly testified that he is a Jew." Erasmus refers to Aleandro's physical and biological Jewish characteristics, his way of speaking, and particularly his "whole Jewish appearance." In characterizing or judging people by such parameters, Erasmus establishes the criteria by which racism is defined: the characteristics of the other are determined by nature and are unchangeable and passed on from one generation to another. In a nutshell, we are dealing here with racism.

Admittedly, Renaissance humanists in general did not openly present an orderly ethnological hierarchy, and nor did Erasmus. However, such an echelon can be reconstructed from his writings. The following is the hierarchical conception of humankind embedded in Erasmus' thought.²²

For Erasmus, a particular group (European Christians) is considered the pinnacle of God's creation; a second group (Turks/Muslims) is defined as half-Christian; a third group (converts from Judaism to Christianity) is also considered half-Christian; next in this echelon are the Jews; black Africans are the lowest: cursed humans whose black skin marks their moral inferiority and iniquity. The idea that a black convert to Christianity would become (metaphorically)

Collected Works of Erasmus (hereafter: CWE), vol. 71: *Controversies*, J.K. Sowards (ed.), Toronto 1993, p. 103.

²¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmi Opuscula...*, op. cit., pp. 323–324 (lines 67–73). See also: S. Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews*, transl. A. Ollcott, Chicago–London 1986, p. 106.

²² For expanded treatment see my books: N. Ron, *Erasmus and the "Other"...*, op. cit., pp. 162–164; N. Ron, *Erasmus: Intellectual of the 16th Century*, New York 2021, pp. 73–75, 100–101.

white is found in Medieval Christian writing, and Erasmus also expressed it.²³ Black Africans were believed to be the “sons of Ham,” who were cursed (Gen. 9:20–27) and allegedly “blackened” by their sins. This explanation was advanced during the Middle Ages and became the single greatest and twisted justification for black slavery for generations. The idea of skin blackened by sin was shared by Erasmus, who explained in his *Ecclesiastes*: “Those who were previously Ethiopians, black because of their crimes, after discovering Jesus are no longer the person they used to be, and they were wrapped with the white wool of the sheep.”²⁴ Thus, Erasmus considered the black skin of African natives a moral signifier as well as a physical hallmark. Besides, Africa or its natives are sporadically mentioned in Erasmus’s writings – always messaging negativity of one form or another. For example, “Libyan animal” (*Libyca fera*) and “African bird” (*Afra avis*) convey a sense of wildness or unusual appearance. “Africa,” according to one of these *adagia*, “always produces something negative.” Etienne Wolf observed that the variety of traits that Erasmus attributes to Africans includes infidelity, drunkenness, a tendency to rebellion, and extreme selfishness. Significantly, Wolf points out that, directly or indirectly, Erasmus frequently quoted these adages in his works, namely in his *Colloquia*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Explanatio Symboli*, *De Pueris Instituendis*, and in his letters. Consequently, one should deduce that Erasmus accepted these prejudices, and appreciated them as reflecting certain truths. Accordingly, it was not the Turks who formed the distinctive and negative embodiment of the “Other” in Erasmus’s writings, but the Jews and the Africans.²⁵

The following description and explanation are telling:

When Europeans encountered people, primarily on the west coast of Africa, with extremely dark skin, they were startled by blackness, and sought to understand it through a haze of emotional disturbance. By late medieval times, blackness

²³ Cf. N. Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”...*, op. cit., pp. 51–52; N. Ron, *Erasmus: Intellectual...*, op. cit., pp. 73–74. See also: C.J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors...*, op. cit., pp. 20–47; M.L. Kaplan, *Figuring Racism...*, op. cit., pp. 103–134.

²⁴ *Ecclesiastes*, [in:] *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, serie: *Opera omnia*, Amsterdam 1969–1994, V-4, 428: “et qui prius erant Aethiopes nigri criminibus, exuunt veterem hominem et Christum induentes candido agni vellere amiciuntur” (transl. NR). See: G.H. Williams, *Erasmus and the Reformers on Non-Christian Religions and ‘Salus Extra Ecclesiam’*, [in:] *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of E.H. Harbison*, T.K. Rabb, J.E. Seigel (eds.), Princeton 1969, p. 335; É. Wolf, *Érasme et l’Afrique: Comment penser l’altérité*, “Scholia” 8 (1999), pp. 96–103 (especially 102).

²⁵ Cf. E. Wolf, *Érasme et l’Afrique...*, op. cit., pp. 96–103 (particularly 101–103); N. Ron, *Erasmus: Intellectual...*, op. cit., pp. 73–74.

conjured a picture of evil or something inherently defective, undesirable, or mysterious, and contrasted with whiteness or lightness, which was associated with goodness, desirability, and honesty. Dark skin reflexively elicited suspicion, distrust, pejorative associations of negative behaviors including cannibalism and devilishness, and immediate associations of inferiority.²⁶

Religiously, a hierarchical conception of faiths existed in Medieval Europe. Christianity was at the top, Islam was second best, and Judaism was considered the lowest of the three religions.²⁷ In addition, one must bear in mind significant historical developments related to racism, namely the enactment of the purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) laws in Spain and the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.²⁸ Therefore, the move from a religious-ethnological hierarchy, such as Erasmus's, to a complete racial one in the 16th and 17th centuries is unsurprising. Several Jesuit missionaries, from Jose de Acosta (c. 1540–1600) in Peru to Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) in the East Indies, employed a comparative

²⁶ N.G. Jablonski, *Skin color and race*, "American Journal of Physical Anthropology" 175/2 (2021), pp. 437–447 (cited from p. 441); cf. N.G. Jablonski, *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color*, Berkeley 2012, pp. 114–125.

²⁷ Cf. I. Resnick, *Conversion from the Worst to the Best: The Relationship Between Medieval Judaism, Islam, and Christianity*, [in:] *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World*, Y. Fox, Y. Yisraeli (eds.), London–New York 2017, pp. 197–209.

²⁸ Cf. A.A. Sicroff, *Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre: controversias entre los siglos XV y XVII*, Madrid 1985; G.B. Kaplan, *The Inception of Limpieza de Sangre (Purity of Blood) and its Impact in Medieval and Golden Age Spain*, [in:] *Marginal Voices: Studies in Converso Literature of Medieval and Golden Age Spain*, A.I. Aronson-Friedman, G.B. Kaplan (eds.), serie: *Medieval and early modern Iberian world* 46, Leiden–Boston 2012, pp. 19–42; A. Molinié, B. Perez, *De la pureté de sang aux XVe et XVIe siècles*, [in:] *Hebraic Aspects of the Renaissance: Sources and Encounters*, I. Zinguer, A. Melamed, Z. Shalev (eds.), serie: *Brill's Series in Jewish Studies* 45, Leiden 2011, pp. 137–153; *La pureté de sang en Espagne. Du lignage à la «race»*, R. Carrasco, A. Molinié, B. Perez (éd.), Paris 2011; D. Nirenberg, *Was there race before modernity? The example of 'Jewish' blood in late medieval Spain*, [in:] *The Origins of Racism...*, op. cit., pp. 232–264; D. Nirenberg, *Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain*, "The American Historical Review" 107/4 (2002), pp. 1065–1093. On the Jesuits and the regulations of purity of blood, see: R.A. Markys, *The Jesuit Order as a Synagogue of Jews: Jesuits of Jewish Ancestry and Purity-of-Blood Laws in the Early Society of Jesus*, Leiden 2010. On the regulations and their implementation in the Spanish empire, see: M.E. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, Stanford 2008. On the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, see: W.D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, Oxford 2005, pp. 17–18; J.A. Rawley, S.D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, Lincoln NE 2005, pp. 18–44; S. Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History*, London–New York 1993.

ethnology in which the natural inferiority of black people was sharply fixed, and developed a hierarchical model stipulating the superiority of Europeans over others.²⁹ Erasmus's hierarchy was a significant antecedent and by no means a random exception.

Erasmus was “the prince of humanists,” the most prolific and influential scholar of his time.³⁰ Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper defined him as a colossal intellectual in the history of ideas, the most significant intellectual hero of the sixteenth century, a cosmopolitan in an age of emerging nationalism, whose intellectuality influenced the Enlightenment movement.³¹ One may therefore infer that if Erasmus is proven to have held a racist mindset, other contemporary humanists held a similar if not identical conception of humankind. Those researchers who argue in favor of the use of the term “race” and its derivatives in relation to Medieval Europe, are right.³² Racism is indeed reflected in Renaissance humanism and *zeitgeist*.

Erasmus wanted a Europe devoid of Jews. Again, in this regard, he was no exception. Historically, expulsions of Jews were common practice in medieval and early modern Europe. Erasmus praised France, where “[t]he law flourishes as nowhere else, nowhere has religion so retained its purity without being corrupted by commerce carried on by the Jews, as in Italy, or infected by the proximity of the Turks or Marranos, as in Hungary

²⁹ Cf. J.-P. Rubiés, *Comparing Cultures in the Early Modern World: Hierarchies, Genealogies and the Idea of European Modernity*, [in:] *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology*, R. Gagné, S. Goldhill, G.E.R. Lloyd (eds.), Leiden–Boston 2018, pp. 116–176 (131); J.-P. Rubiés, *Were Early Modern Europeans Racist?*, [in:] *Ideas of ‘Race’ in the History of the Humanities*, A. Morris-Reich, D. Rupnow (eds.), Cham 2017, pp. 33–87 (particularly 36–37, 68). See also: M.L. Kaplan, *Figuring Racism...*, op. cit., p. 8 note 34.

³⁰ Cf. e.g., Fridericus Nausea (1480–1552), a Church prelate and follower of Erasmus, wrote in his *Monodia*: “To whom do we owe it that in our age the ploughman at his plough thinks on some part of the Gospel? Is it not Erasmus? And that the weaver accompanies his labours at the loom with something from the Gospel? Is it not to Erasmus?” – quoted from B.E. Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus c. 1550–1770*, Toronto 1979, p. 10. On Erasmus’ immense influence on modernity, see: B.E. Mansfield, *Erasmus in the Nineteenth Century: The Liberal Tradition*, “Studies in the Renaissance” 15 (1968), pp. 193–219.

³¹ Cf. H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Desiderius Erasmus*, [in:] H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Men and Events: Historical Essays*, New York 1977, pp. 35–60 (first published 1957); H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The Religious Origins of the Enlightenment*, [in:] H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change and other essays*, London–Melbourne 1967, pp. 193–236.

³² Cf. G. Heng, *The Invention of Race...*, op. cit., pp. 23–24. See also note 5.

and Spain.”³³ This expression implies the Erasmian ideal of a Europe devoid of Jews and an acceptance of the deportation of French Jews during the Middle Ages, the most infamous occurrence in 1306, the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth. Against the background of this racist mindset, Reuchlin’s uniqueness shines even stronger.

The Exceptional Reuchlin

In contrast to Erasmus, Reuchlin feared that with the expulsion of the Jews they would no longer be available as a literary resource. In the preface of his *Basic Principles of the Hebrew Language* (*De rudimentis hebraicis* 1506), he complained about the persecution of Spanish and German Jews, who were subsequently forced to seek residence elsewhere and turn to the Arab lands. Thus, the Jews would no longer serve as experts to be consulted, and, without their presence, their Hebrew books would soon disappear.³⁴

Reuchlin warmly embraced Jewish learning and publicly praised Jews, e.g. his Hebrew teacher,³⁵ and a fictional Jew, at the beginning of Book II of *De arte cabalistica*:

They [Reuchlin’s two other characters, Philolaus and Marranus] were full of admiration for the quality of his teaching, his extraordinary kindness to strangers, and above all his dignified manner... Fired with passion for learning, they called to mind the Jew’s extraordinary speaking style; incisive in argument, serious and erudite in instruction, its delight never palled.³⁶

As David Ruderman observed, such a positive portrayal of contemporary Jewish culture by such a Christian intellectual at that time – the controversy

³³ *A Complaint of Peace*, [in:] CWE, vol. 27: *Literary and Educational Writings*, 5 and 6, A.H.T. Levi (ed.), Toronto 1986, p. 306; N. Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other”*..., op. cit., pp. 131–132, 141–145.

³⁴ Cf. F. Posset, *Respect for the Jews*, Eugene 2019, p. 46 note 27.

³⁵ Cf. a letter to Yaakov ben Yechiel Loans: *Johannes Reuchlin Briefwechsel*, M. Dall’Asta, G. Dörner (Hg.), Bd. 1: 1477–1505, Stuttgart 1999, letter no. 105, p. 338. See also: D.H. Price, *Christian Humanism and the Representation of Judaism: Johannes Reuchlin and the Discovery of Hebrew*, “*Arthuriana*” 19/3 (2009), pp. 80–96 (especially 82 and note 13).

³⁶ Cited from D.B. Ruderman, *Review of Johann Reuchlin*, On the Art of the Kabbalah, “*Renaissance Quarterly*” 37/3 (1984), p. 433.

over the destruction of Hebrew books was roaring – should be recognized as a most courageous political and cultural declaration.³⁷

Interreligious dialogue is a modern phenomenon and term; it was hardly existent, if at all, in medieval and early modern Europe.³⁸ Nevertheless, irrespective of his wish to witness the Christianization of the Jews, Reuchlin's case is a peculiar one. He kept a constant dialog not only with Jewish texts and the Hebrew language but with contemporary Jews, and sometimes he wrote letters in Hebrew.³⁹ His dialogical spirit is also expressed in his expert opinion (*Ratschlag, Gutachten*) on whether the books of the Jews should be destroyed, submitted in 1510 to the Archbishop of Mainz, Uriel von Gemmingen (1468–1514).⁴⁰

In this document, Reuchlin openly states: “The Jew is one of Our Lord God's creatures just as much as I am,”⁴¹ a statement as liberal as can be concerning Jews in sixteenth-century Europe.⁴² No less liberal is Reuchlin's paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 5: 12: “that they are not members of the Christian Church and thus their beliefs are of no consequence to us.”⁴³ According to Reuchlin, the Jews are the Holy Roman Empire's subjects, just as others are.

First: The Jews, as subjects of the Holy Roman Empire should be treated according to Imperial Laws... Second: Our property should not be taken from us without our consent... Third: Imperial and regal codes and also other princely decrees forbid that any person should have his property taken by force... Fourth: Every person should be allowed to retain his old inherited traditions, customs and possessions, even if he were a robber... Fifth: Therefore, the Jews should be permitted to retain their synagogues, called 'schools', in peace and

³⁷ Cf. D. Ruderman, *Review of Johann Reuchlin...*, op. cit., p. 433.

³⁸ Cf. N. Ron, *Nicholas of Cusa, Francis of Assisi, and interreligious dialogue*, “Academia Letters” (July 2021), pp. 1–6.

³⁹ See n. 32 and Reuchlin's letter in Hebrew to Bonetus or Bonet de Lattes, the Pope's physician: *Johannes Reuchlin Briefwechsel*, M. Dall'Asta, G. Dörner (Hg.), Bd. 2: 1506–1513, Stuttgart 2003, letter no. 228, 431, pp. 64–79 (Hebrew text plus Latin and German versions and extensive explanatory footnotes).

⁴⁰ The expert opinion or report (*Ratschlag ob man den iuden alle ire buecher nemmen/ abt-buen unnd verbrennen sol*) is part of Reuchlin's *Augenspiegel* found in *Johannes Reuchlin, Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 4, Teil 1, W.-W. Ehlers, H.G. Roloff, P. Schäfer (Hg.), Stuttgart 1996, pp. 27–64.

⁴¹ *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books...*, op. cit., p. 190.

⁴² Cf. E. Rummel, *Humanists, Jews, and Judaism*, [in:] *Jews, Judaism and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, D.P. Bell, S.G. Burnett (eds.), Leiden 2006, p. 20.

⁴³ *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books...*, op. cit., p. 168; F. Posset, *Respect for the Jews*, op. cit., p. 42.

tranquility and should not be interfered with. Sixth: Such Jewish books have never been condemned or censured by either Canon or Civil Law... And therefore, they [our laws] state one should not wrench such books from the Jews, suppress or burn them.⁴⁴

Reuchlin deals here not just with books. He extends the scope of his examination and refers to the rights of the Jews to stick to their traditions, customs, and synagogues. It seems that he is concerned with the well-being of the Jews in general; it is not only books that he is interested in keeping undamaged because of his scholarly occupation. Thus, the Jews are to be treated according to imperial law. Their property must not be confiscated, and since they are not members of the Church, their faith is their own business. Therefore, the Jews should be tolerated as law-abiding fellow citizens of the Empire, even if they live in continuous error until they recognize the error of their belief and accept Christianity.⁴⁵ Reuchlin's attitude toward the Jews did not change and remained steadfast even when facing legal proceedings and attacks by his bitter enemies. His long and persistent struggle to save the Jewish books and consequently preserve Jewish cultural existence in Central Europe is the unique initiative of an extraordinary intellectual.

The argument that Christian Hebraism was not philo-Semitism but rather the study of Judaica for Christian purposes may be valid.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Reuchlin struggled against the current and redefined the boundaries of Christian representation of Jews and Judaism.⁴⁷ David Price comments on this:

⁴⁴ Cited after: *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books...*, op. cit., p. 122; J. Reuchlin, *Augenspiegel*, op. cit., p. 28: "Zum ersten dann die iuden als underthonen des hailigen roemischen reiches sollent by kaysserlichen rechten behaltten warden... Zum andern was unser ist das soll von uns nit moegen kommen/ on unsser zue thuen... Zum dritten kaysserliche und kuenigkliche recht auch andere furstliche satzungen habent es furkommen das nieman das syn verliere durch gewalt... Zum vierden so sol ain ieglicher by synem alten herkommen brauch und besess behalten warden/ ob er gleich ain rauber wer... Zum funfften so sollent die iuden ire synagogen die man nennt schul ruewigklich on irrung unnd eintrag moegen halten... Zum sechsten so sind solch iuden bucher noch nit weder von gaistlichen noch weltlichen rechten verworffen noch verdampft... Unnd darumb mainen die selben man sol nit moegen solliche bucher den iuden abreissen und die undertrucken oder verbrennen."

⁴⁵ Cf. *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books...*, op. cit., pp. 85, 88–89.

⁴⁶ Cf. D. Kaplan, Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books by David H. Price, "Jewish History" 27 (2013), pp. 101–105 (especially 104).

⁴⁷ Cf. D.H. Price, *Christian Humanism...*, op. cit., p. 82.

Reuchlin did not formulate a theology or philosophy of toleration, but he did defend Jewish life in two effective ways: he meticulously asserted the legal rights of Jews and the legality of Jewish writings, and, more distinctively, he created a new Christian discourse that represented Jews and Judaism favorably, thereby not only invoking a concept of justice for Jews [...] but also encouraging Christians to develop respect for the beleaguered minority and its religious heritage.⁴⁸

Conclusions

An explicit reverberating expression of the zeitgeist's anti-Jewishness was made by Conradus Mutianus (1470–1526). The humanist who was regarded by many as the third great German humanist after Erasmus and Reuchlin, “subtle and open-minded... a fine judge of literature and critical of traditional religious practice,”⁴⁹ wrote: “I hate the Jews, although most of them are good and have earned merits for me.”⁵⁰ This manifestation of hatred does not perhaps fall within my definition of racism, but it is undoubtedly a direct anti-Jewish zeitgeist reflection.

As Elisheva Carlebach has explained, in order to properly appreciate Reuchlin as an exception in the context of his era and zeitgeist, one has to remember that in 1510, the year Reuchlin wrote his expert opinion recommending the preservation of the Jewish books and, by that, defending the Jews, thirty-eight Jews were burnt in Berlin after being convicted of stealing and torturing a host, although a Christian man had previously confessed to having done it.⁵¹

Another significant point that Carlebach emphasized, pertaining to Reuchlin's universal intellectual contribution, has to do with the relationship between state and faith: “Reuchlin's voice for the rule of justice and law in an

⁴⁸ D.H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign...*, op. cit., p. 228. See also: M. Dall'Asta, Price, *David H[otchkiss]: Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, “Scientia Poetica” 16/1 (2012), p. 217.

⁴⁹ *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 2, P.G. Bietenholz, T.B. Deutscher (eds.), Toronto 2003, p. 474.

⁵⁰ *Der briefwechsel des Conradus Rufus*, K. Gillert (Hg.), Bd. 1–2, Serie: *Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen und angrenzender Gebiete* 18, Halle 1890, no. 229: “*Odi circumcisos, quamquam boni sunt plurimi et de me bene meriti.*” See also: E. Bernstein, *Die Reuchlin-Kontroverse und der Humanistenkreis um Mutianus Rufus*, [in:] *Die Kunst des Streitens: Inszenierung, Formen und Funktionen öffentlichen Streits in historischer Perspektive*, M. Laureys, R. Simons (Hg.), Göttingen 2010, p. 307.

⁵¹ Cf. E. Carlebach, *Critical Introduction*, [in:] J. Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn all Jewish Books*, transl. P. Wortsman, New York 2000, p. 19.

age of seething religious hostility may be one of the earliest arguments for the separation of church and state.”⁵² Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of such a distinction for developing the liberal idea of freedom of religion. To these insights, we should add Reuchlin’s defense of the Jew’s civil status, his insistence on regarding them as equal co-residents of the Empire, entitled by law to the same civil status, namely (proto-) equality before the law, regardless of being part of a minority or majority. If we position all this against the background of his era and racist zeitgeist, Reuchlin’s uniqueness becomes even more conspicuous. By implication, he was a pioneer and a forerunner of those who fight racism. An exception greater than this in 16th century Europe is hard to find.

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⁵² E. Carlebach, *Critical Introduction...*, op. cit., 20.

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