

“*Non contrarii, ma diversi*”: the question of minority in the eyes of Christians and Jews in Italy (early 15<sup>th</sup>-mid 18<sup>th</sup> century)

21 – 22 November 2016 - Workshop - EHESS and INALCO, Paris

“[...] *se li dice non esser gl’Hebrei con li Christiani contrarij, come il Nero al Bianco [...], ma diversi a guisa del Dolce & il Rosso,*” writes the rabbi and philosopher Simone Luzzatto in his famous *Discourse Concerning the Condition of the Jews* published in Venice in 1638. Although some fear that diversity within the same city causes discord and dissension, “one must tell them that Jews and Christians are not opposite like black to white [...], but different in the manner of sweet and red.” This is a powerful way of imagining the difference between these two social groups. In the eyes of the author, this heterogeneity, however radical it might appear to be, does not prevent a happy and peaceful coexistence. On the contrary: it is its radical nature that makes possible a happy coexistence, since it excludes any conflict between the two communities. Jews and Christians are “not opposite, but different”: “*non contrarii, ma diversi*”.

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Our workshop will be devoted to the theme of (Jewish) minority in Italy, and more specifically to how the problem of minority was defined and how, both on the Christian and on the Jewish side, Jewish presence was (or not) considered the presence of a minority. We are not talking about how Jews *looked at* Christians and Christians *at Jews*, which would be a huge and very vague subject, but rather how, in language and categories that remain to be specified, the presence of a minority (i.e., a smaller, different, and self-identifying group) was conceived in a society typically portrayed as a homogeneous body and totally Christian. A clarification is needed here: just as there is no obligation to believe that this putatively Christian society constitutes a homogeneous body, one can and must question the assumption of culturally and socially homogeneous Jewish population in early modern Italy. The latter was also stratified, especially in terms of class and gender, and subject to internal oppositions. Our reflection extends therefore to the very relevance of the concept of minority; we want to question this scholarly category and determine if its use seems convincing.

Luzzatto’s assertion is of course debatable, especially if we remember that it was formulated during a period of ghettoization; written in an apologetic perspective, it epitomizes the liberal position toward the place of the Jewish minority in the society of the time, in pointed contrast to other less tolerant conceptions. Let us not forget that some favored the complete disappearance of the Jewish minority, either through expulsionist or conversionist policies. On the other hand, in order to pose the question correctly, it may be necessary to admit the difficulties presented by the presence of a religious minority in a society where the modern concept of secularism was still nonexistent; that way, one can get rid of a number of moral judgments, for example regarding the attitudes of authorities towards the Jews of the time. In conclusion, our collective inquiry should be conducted with the aim of not caricaturing attitudes of both sides and preserving the diversity of cases and contexts.

What did “making a society” mean in the context of Renaissance and early modern Italy? How could one organize viable cohabitation between minority and majority communities? It seems that, differently from today but in ways that echo contemporary problems, the Italian *Ancien Regime* knew indeed, in its own way, how to articulate minorities, political body, diverse “communities.”

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Our work will focus on the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance and Early Modern period, through the establishment of ghettos in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These questions will be addressed in three thematic sessions:

- First, the *legal and political framework*: that is to say, both the problem, so important in contemporary historiography, of how the “right of the Jews” is conceived (particularly the question of their citizenship), the practical attitudes of authorities towards the Jews (the “Jewish policies” of the states) and, conversely, Jewish agency in this area, if one can notice it; internal organization and modes of self-government (following a Christian model?) within communities is an important point here ;
- Second, *cultural phenomena*: a common ground was gradually created between Christians and Jews, in religious as well as in cultural terms at large. A common struggle was recommended against an enemy who was no longer the faithful of another religion, but the atheist. The same high language was now shared: literary Italian (Tuscan). Alongside Hebrew and Latin, which continued to be used, a large “neutral zone” was created, much like had happened centuries before in the Arab and Muslim world
- Finally, *economic and social practices*: Jews, who at that time were often active in money-trading, were granted a position of “central marginality,” made possible by their minority status, which earned them both hostility (see the theme of usury) and recognition for their social and economic utility. According to place and time, Jewish presence was tolerated differently, and the ghettoization clearly narrowed socio-economic opportunities of the Jews; the definitive prohibition of usury in some states probably caused a change (in a positive sense?) in the status and experience of the Jewish minority.

It is through considering these three themes together that interesting conclusions about perceptions of the Jewish minority in Renaissance Italy can be drawn. This workshop on objects rarely studied in France will provide a useful moment to reflect on an issue that has such strong contemporary echoes.