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POLEMICS

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JEWISH ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMICAL TREATISES IN EARLY MODERN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: WHERE ARE THEY?

The simple answer to the question posed in the title is that there are almost no Jewish anti-Christian polemics in early modern Central and Eastern Europe. This is true for those areas which are considered part of the Ashkenazic Jewish realm, including Germanic lands, Bohemia, Poland-Lithuania, Ukraine and the like. Since that is the case, other questions follow: Why should one expect such treatises? Why do they not exist? Is the early modern period different from the medieval one? Are there such treatises outside areas of Ashkenazic cultural domination? Answering these questions will help us understand better the history of the Jewish critique of Christianity in the medieval and early modern periods.

The first question to be answered is why we should expect to find Jewish anti-Christian treatises in early modern Central and Eastern Europe. Polemical literature was a common literary feature produced by medieval Jews, who produced a significant amount of literature devoted to the refutation of Christianity, in addition to embedding anti-Christian materials in works of other genres. If we accept the common wisdom, what I call the traditional narrative of the Jewish-Christian debate, Jews attacked Christianity in the context of Christian pressure, especially conversionary pressure; when Christians left Jews alone, Jews ignored Christianity and certainly did not attack it. Thus, Jewish composition of anti-Christian treatises in Christendom from the twelfth century on is a reaction to a Christian missionary campaign. At those times and places where anti-Jewish pressure was particularly acute in the Middle Ages, such as in Franco-Germany, Provence and Spain from the thirteenth century on, we find such treatises in abundance. This genre includes free-standing polemical

works, such as the twelfth-century Jacob ben Reuben's *Wars of the Lord* or the anonymous thirteenth-century *Nizzahon Yashan*, as well as accounts of public disputations, such as those of Paris, 1240, written by Joseph ben Nathan Official, and Barcelona, 1263, written by the chief Jewish representative, Nahmanides. The treatises produced are important parts of the Jewish literary heritage and reflect Jewish attitudes towards Christianity and refutations of its major doctrines.¹

In the early modern period, the dynamics between Jews and Christians changed, and the power of the Catholic Church, and the mendicant orders which were at the forefront of conversionary campaigns, diminished in light of the Reformation and the rise of the nation-state. Nevertheless, Christians were still attacking Jews and Judaism, especially with help from Christian Hebraists and former Jews who had converted to Christianity; Jewish literature and practices were common targets.² Jews suffered legal disabilities and the censorship of their books, and leading Christian scholars, such as Johann Christoph Wagenseil and Theodor Hackspan, published Jewish anti-Christian polemics in order to refute their arguments. There were attacks on the Talmud such as those of Johann Pfefferkorn and Johann Andreas Eisenmenger. In light of ongoing Christian attempts to delegitimize Judaism and convert its adherents, one would expect to find anti-Christian treatises from this period, yet, as noted, they are almost non-existent in Ashkenazi areas.

We do find many polemical works in other parts of Europe at this time. Thus, if we look at early modern Amsterdam, we see that indeed there is abundant Jewish polemical material, especially in the seventeenth century. This literary production, produced mainly by Jews of Sephardic background, seems to have been stimulated mostly by the struggles of the returning Iberian Conversos who were caught betwixt and between the Inquisitorial forces in their native country and their desire to return to their ancestral religion. Having been cut off from Rabbinic Judaism for over 100 years, many of these New Christians were unaware of contemporary Jewish practice, and they often approached Rabbinic Jewish beliefs and practices with the prejudices instilled in them by the Church. In this environment, we find a healthy production of polemical works, many based on medieval Jewish anti-Christian treatises. The medieval compositions were used as a partial basis for composing original polemical books, many of which were written in the vernacular, such as the *Marrakesh Dialogues*,³ or the works of Orobio de Castro⁴ and of Saul Morteira.⁵

¹ On the Jewish critique of Christianity, see, e.g., Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*; Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*; and Krauss – Horbury, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy*. An overview of the literature on both sides of the debate is provided by Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*.

² See, e.g., Deutsch, *Judaism*.

³ Wilke, *The Marrakesh Dialogues*.

⁴ Kaplan, *From Christianity*.

⁵ Saperstein, *Exile*; Kaplan, *Arguments Against the Christian*.

We also have a polemical exchange, in Hebrew, between a Jew of Amsterdam and the Christian Hebraist Johann Stefan Rittangel, who was in that city to publish his edition of *Sefer Yezirah*.⁶ Even Benedict Spinoza, certainly no friend of traditional Judaism, made use of the Jewish anti-Christian tradition in his critique of Christianity.⁷

Another area of intense Jewish polemical literary output was Italy. Recent research by Karoly Daniel Doboš has turned up at least 56 Hebrew anti-Christian treatises from Italy, in addition to those which were written in the vernacular.⁸ Post-medieval Italy, the home of the first official ghetto in 1516, was not a Garden of Eden for Jews, and Jews were forced to hear Christian missionizing sermons in Rome from the late sixteenth until the eighteenth century. There were also some Italian Jewish converts, but there was no constant anti-Jewish missionary campaign in all areas of what is now Italy. It is hard to conceive that Christian pressure was sufficient to cause the writing of 56 Hebrew responses, even if we take into account the presence of former Conversos in Italy.⁹ Whatever the case, it is still significant that in Italy, Jews wrote so many polemical treatises, whereas in Central and Eastern Europe, we find almost no such literature.

Since there were Jews who responded to the challenges of Christianity in early modern Western and Southern Europe by writing polemics, we might expect to find a comparable Jewish reaction to parallel Christian challenges in Central and Eastern Europe during the same period. Yet, as mentioned, we do not see analogous polemical treatises to the east of Amsterdam and north of Italy. I would explain this lack by noting that the traditional narrative that Jewish anti-Christian literature was written in response to a Christian threat on Judaism is not the only narrative that explains this literature. In fact, I have devoted a number of years of my academic career to an attempt to undermine the traditional narrative.¹⁰ First of all, I have discussed at length the Jewish critique of Christianity in Muslim countries where there was no Christian mission to the Jews.¹¹ My work included co-editing the earliest extant Jewish anti-Christian work, the ninth-century *Account of the Disputation of the Priest*, written in Judaeo-Arabic, which eventually became the Hebrew *Book of Nestor*

⁶ Wagenseil, *Tela Ignea Satanae*, Vol. 1, 327–373 (with Latin translation). An English translation is available in Rankin, *Jewish Religious Polemic*, 89–154.

⁷ Lasker, “Reflections of the Medieval”; Popkin (ed.), “Jewish Anti-Christian Arguments”; Carlebach, “Amsterdam and the reversion.”

⁸ I thank Dr. Doboš for that information; see also Lasker, “Anti-Christian Polemics.” And see <http://www.jcrpolemicsinitaly.at/> (accessed September 30, 2018).

⁹ On Jewish conversions in Italy, see, e.g., Mazur, *Conversion to Catholicism*. The question remains as to whether there is a correlation between specific areas of anti-Jewish missionary activity in Italy and the Jewish polemical output. I thank Emily Michelson for discussing this issue with me. On the place of Conversos in Italian Jewish polemical literature, see Doboš, “The Impact of the Conversos.”

¹⁰ Lasker, “Narrative.”

¹¹ Lasker, “The Jewish Critique.”

the Priest.¹² In addition, I have also explored eighteenth-century Italian Jewish polemics and edited one of them.¹³ The examples of the Jewish critique of Christianity in the medieval Islamicate and in early modern Italy should suffice to demonstrate that in contrast to the traditional narrative that Jews attacked Christianity only when they, themselves, were attacked, Jewish polemical treatises were not necessarily responses to a direct Christian threat to Judaism. In addition, there is evidence that even in medieval Christian Europe the Jewish critique of Christianity was not always motivated by a perceived need to refute Christianity.¹⁴

Why then did Jews engage in anti-Christian polemics when there was no Christian missionary threat or other such pressure? I think the answer is that refutations of Christianity are part of Jewish self-reflections on theology. Those Jewish thinkers who engaged in rational speculation, namely Jews from Islamic lands, and Sephardic and Italian Jews, also engaged in inter-religious polemic. Thus from the dawn of Jewish anti-Christian polemics in the ninth century, with the first medieval Jewish philosopher Dawud al-Muqammaṣ; through Saadia Gaon in the tenth century; Nahmanides in the thirteenth; Hasdai Crescas in the fourteenth; and Joseph Albo and Isaac Abravanel in the fifteenth; anti-Christian polemics was an integral feature of Jewish theology. Occasionally there was a confluence of factors that led to Jewish anti-Christian literary activity, such as occurred in the century between the anti-Jewish riots and the expulsion of Jews from Spain (1391–1492). It was during this period that the Jewish philosophical critique of Christianity was particularly well developed in a significant body of literature.¹⁵

In contrast, what emerges from a study of Franco-German Jewry is the dearth of specific treatises devoted to attacks on Christianity. In fact, if we look at the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, there are basically two periods of polemical activity: the second half of the thirteenth century, in the wake of the Disputation of Paris, 1240, and the attacks on the Talmud; and in Prague in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Prague polemicists were not typical Ashkenazi intellectuals, since they were quite aware of Sephardic modes of theology and polemics. In addition, the anti-Christian authors in Prague were leading luminaries, led by Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen.¹⁶ In contrast, the polemicists in High Medieval France-Germany were relatively minor figures, even anonymous, such as the author of *Nizzahon Yashan*. Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, the main Jewish participant in Paris, and one of the Tosafists, did not write the account of the disputation; this was left to Joseph ben Nathan Official who apparently was what I call a professional polemicist who also

¹² Lasker – Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor*.

¹³ Lasker, “Herev Pifiyyot.”

¹⁴ Berger, “Mission to the Jew.”

¹⁵ See Lasker, “Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics.”

¹⁶ See Lasker, “Jewish Philosophical Polemics.”

wrote *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*. This can be contrasted to the case of Nahmanides, the leading Iberian luminary of his generation, who did write an account of his participation in the Disputation of Barcelona. In sum, leading Ashkenazic Jewish intellectuals did not author anti-Christian treatises; at most, they engaged in invective against Christians in their religious poetry, or included anti-Christian comments in their other writings, such as commentaries, and even here, I believe the claims of anti-Christian motives in Ashkenazic exegetical works are exaggerated.¹⁷

If Christian pressure leads to a Jewish response, we would expect Ashkenazi Jewry to respond by writing specifically anti-Christian treatises, which they did but only during a window of approximately fifty years in the second half of the thirteenth century. But otherwise they were silent, because, as noted, anti-Christian polemics is a sub-category of Jewish theology or philosophy. To the extent that Jews did not engage in systematic reflection on their beliefs, namely the situation in Ashkenaz, they did not write anti-Christian polemics; in contrast, Jewish theologians, in other parts of the world, who did engage in such speculation, also attacked Christianity, even in the absence of a so-called Christian threat and even if they did not devote specific treatises to the subject.¹⁸ If one were an Ashkenazi Jew, one just did not partake in the same activity.

A corollary to this observation about Ashkenazic polemics is the difference in literary genres between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry. Among Sephardic Jews, an important genre is the dialogue, as can be seen in two major Jewish philosophical works, Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Fountain of Life*, and Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*. There is a dialogical nature to most polemical works, such as Jacob ben Reuben's *Wars of the Lord*, Nahmanides' account of the Disputation of Barcelona, or Shem Tov ibn Shaprut's *Touchstone*.¹⁹ In contrast, Ashkenazic Jews did not write dialogues. Moses Mendelssohn wrote the dialogue *Phaedo* in 1767, a take-off on the Platonic dialogue, but this exception proves the rule. Mendelssohn initiated a newfound interest in philosophy among the German branch of Ashkenazi Jewry. Thus, he engaged in reflections upon Jewish theology; he used the dialogical genre; and he also published refutations of Christianity, such as his response to Lavater and his letter to Karl-Wilhelm, the hereditary prince of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel.²⁰ My generalization remains valid: a Jewish community which does not reflect on theology and does not

¹⁷ See, e.g., Lasker, "Joseph ben Nathan"; and the further references provided there. I use the term "professional polemicist" to denote someone who devoted his major intellectual energies to studying Christianity, e.g., mastering Latin and reading Christian sources for the purposes of polemicizing and not as an incidental part of his intellectual profile.

¹⁸ Saadia Gaon, for example, included anti-Christian arguments in both his theological and exegetical works; see Lasker, "Saadia."

¹⁹ See Hughes, *The Art of Dialogue*.

²⁰ Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 113–127. Ram Ben-Shalom informs me of a text he discovered in which a Polish Jew, Elazar Shalom, wrote a polemical dialogue against Christianity but only after moving west and being influenced by Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment.

use the dialogue as a genre is not very likely to produce literary works of inter-religious polemics.

The Ashkenazic situation did not change much in the early modern period. Central and Eastern European Jews generally continued not to be interested in theology, not to write dialogues, and not to write anti-Christian polemics. There are no major anti-Christian polemics produced by Ashkenazic Jewry in the early modern period; no *Nizzahon Yashan*²¹ and no *Nizzahon*.²² This is despite the growing pressure on Jews, especially in the works of Christian Hebraists, some of whom used their erudition to attack Jewish beliefs and practices. In contrast, in the same period, Amsterdam Jewry was mainly Sephardic and it simply continued the Sephardic tradition of anti-Christian polemics. And, as mentioned, Jewish anti-Christian treatises were flourishing in Italy, another area where Jews engaged in theological self-reflection.

Despite what was written until now, we can find a few exceptions to the generalization that Central and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews eschewed the writing of anti-Christian treatises. For instance, we could look at the lost work of Jacob of Belzyce, known to us from the refutation of it by the Socinian Martin Czechowic published in 1581. From Czechowic's account of Jacob's arguments, it would seem that we have here an example of a Polish-Jewish treatise devoted specifically to anti-Christian polemic. We have almost no information about Jacob the author, and whether he was an actual historical figure, but Judah Rosenthal, who brought Jacob's lost work to scholarly attention, speculates that he may have been "one of the physicians of Spanish origin living in Lublin". According to Czechowic, Jacob cited the story of the conversion of the King of the Khazars as proof of the truth of Judaism. That story is, of course, the basis of Judah Halevi's *Book of Kuzari*. Thus, even if Jacob of Belzyce was a Polish anti-Christian polemicist, he was not a typical Ashkenazic Jew and seems to have had Sephardic connections.²³

Or consider Zalman Zvi of Aufhausen's *Yudisher Theriak* (Jewish Theriac) written in Yiddish in 1615, in order to refute accusations against Jews of the apostate Samuel Friedrich Brenz in his *Juedischer abgestreiffter Schlangenbalg* (*Jewish Stripped-off Snakeskin*), from 1614. Brenz's accusations were more social than theological, namely Jews hate Christians, blaspheme Jesus, and the like. Zalman's response was a refutation of those accusations, not a discussion of Christian doctrines or even biblical exegesis. It is mostly a work of apologetics with no refutation of Christian doctrines.²⁴

²¹ This major work was edited by Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*.

²² Muhlhausen, *Sefer Nizzahon*.

²³ Rosenthal, "Marcin Czechowic"; Rosenthal, "Jacob of Belzyce." Familiarity with the *Kuzari* was apparently not widespread in early modern Eastern Europe; see Shear, *The Kuzari*, 180–193. Jacob could have known of the story of a king and the three religions from *Nizzahon Yashan*; see Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 216–218.

²⁴ Faierstein, *Yudisher Theriak*.

In 1704 in Hanover there was a public disputation between an unnamed Jewish convert to Christianity and Rabbi Joseph Stadthagen. Polemical interchanges between Jews and Christians were not necessarily rare in early modern Central and Eastern Europe, since they were mentioned by such Jewish luminaries as Judah Loew of Prague, Hayyim Yair Bachrach of Koblenz, Worms and Mainz; and Jonathan Eybeschuetz of Prague and Altona-Hamburg.²⁵ What makes Stadthagen different is his short Hebrew-Yiddish account of this public disputation, called *Minḥat Zikkaron* (“The Offering of Memory”). While other Jewish-Christian encounters were mentioned by the Jewish protagonists, they generally did not make a written record of them. Stadthagen’s thirty-page booklet was published from manuscript over 200 years after the event and obviously did not have much contemporary resonance or serve as an example to other authors.²⁶

A later Eastern European treatise which includes an anti-Christian polemical section is Dov Ber of Bolechów’s *Divrei Binah* (“Words of Wisdom”), written in 1800, most of which has remained unpublished. Along with criticizing Christians for abolishing observance of the commandments, Dov Ber refutes blood libel and host desecration accusations. In this work as well, we see Sephardic influence as the author records his investigation of Christian writings as having been stimulated by the admonition of a number of writers, including Judah ben Samuel Lerma, Isaac Arama, Maimonides and Isaac Abravanel, that one should learn how to answer an adversary. All these authors are Sephardim.²⁷

A writer cited by Dov Ber as a source for the refutation of Christianity is Tobias Cohen, author of the important medical treatise *Ma’aseh Tuvyah*. Cohen was born in Metz in 1652 to a father who came from Poland and he, himself, returned to Poland to study in Cracow. Yet Cohen was not a typical Eastern European Ashkenazi Jew either. His grandfather was originally from the Land of Israel. After beginning his medical studies in Frankfurt, he transferred to Padua in Italy and spent most of his career in the Ottoman Empire until his death in 1729. His book begins with a theological introduction which reads like a typical medieval rationalist work, and he writes that his defense of the immutability of Judaism builds upon the works of such authors as Saadia Gaon, Judah Halevi, David Kimhi, Isaac Abravanel, and some of the Jewish anti-Christian polemicists. Thus, any anti-Christian polemics in *Ma’aseh Tuvyah* is probably a function of its author’s exposure to rationalism and science, not of his family origins in Poland.²⁸

²⁵ Katz, *Exclusiveness*.

²⁶ Berliner – Hirsch, *Religionsgespräch*; a summary of this disputation is provided by Krauss – Horbury, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy*, 180–183.

²⁷ Hundert, “*Divre Binah*.”

²⁸ *Ma’aseh Tuvyah* has had multiple editions since it was first published in Venice, 1707–1708; see also Ruderman, “Medicine.”

So, where is there a significant early modern Jewish anti-Christian polemic written by an author with deep roots in early modern Eastern Europe which can compete with the medieval literature in providing a wide-ranging defense of Jewish beliefs and exegesis along with major criticism of the New Testament? In fact, such a work does exist and it is one of the most important Jewish anti-Christian polemics ever written, one which influenced some of the authors I have just mentioned. This book was translated into different languages (Dutch, German, Ladino, Latin, and English) and was the occasion of a number of Christian refutations, including by such luminaries as the aforementioned Wagenseil and A. Lukyn Williams. I am referring to *Hizzuq Emunah* (“Faith Strengthened”), of Isaac ben Abraham of Troki, completed by his student, Joseph ben Mordecai Malinowski, soon after Isaac’s death in 1594.²⁹ *Hizzuq Emunah*’s popularity was a function of its comprehensiveness, providing an exegetical roadmap to refuting Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and providing criticism of the New Testament. Its language is clear and easy to understand.

Isaac was an Eastern European Jew, but, he was not, however, an Ashkenazi Jew; he was a Karaite who lived in the major Lithuanian city of Troki, or Trakai. Eastern European Karaites lived among Ashkenazim but they were certainly not Ashkenazic Jews. They spoke the Turkic Karaim language and not Yiddish, did not engage in the study of Talmud, and they maintained their own separate existence, a separation which eventually led to Karaite denial of any Jewish identity.³⁰ Most importantly for my purposes, Karaites had a long tradition of interest in theology and in anti-Christian polemic.³¹ Isaac of Troki was well conversant with Jewish philosophical theology as can be seen from the list of authors he cites, such as Maimonides, Judah Halevi, Joseph Albo, and Isaac Abravanel. He was also acquainted with internal Christian disagreements which were prevalent in Poland-Lithuania in the wake of the Reformation. We have one other Eastern European Karaite anti-Christian polemic as well, Solomon ben Aharon of Troki’s *Migdal ‘oz* (“Tower of Strength”), written approximately 100 years after Isaac produced *Hizzuq Emunah*.³² Thus, even if Rabbanite Jews in Central and Eastern Europe did not generally produce anti-Christian works, their Karaite brethren certainly did.

My review of the dearth of Central and Eastern European Jewish polemical literature in the early modern period should not be interpreted as saying that Jews did not respond to Christianity in those areas at this period. There are many Jewish references to Christianity and Christian accusations, and the

²⁹ See Isaac of Troki, *Hizzuk Emunah*. For the multiple editions, translations, and Christian refutations, see Walfish – Kizilov, *Bibliographia*, 560–565. On the author, see Akhiezer, “The Karaite Author.”

³⁰ For a general background on Karaism throughout history, see Polliack, *Karaite Judaism*. For studies concerning specifically Eastern European Karaism, see Shapira – Lasker, *Eastern European Karaites*.

³¹ See Lasker, *Judah Hadassi*; Lasker, “Karaism and Christianity.”

³² See Akhiezer – Lasker, “Solomon ben Aaron.”

unique challenges of the period found expression in works composed by Ashkenazi Jews.³³ Central and Eastern European Jews were certainly aware of the challenges presented to them by Christianity and were not indifferent to them. Yet, other than *Hizzuq Emunah*, we find no major anti-Christian polemical works in Central and Eastern Europe in this period. This fact reinforces my assertion, in contrast to the accepted wisdom, that there is no necessary relationship between a Christian threat and a Jewish response in form of polemical, anti-Christian treatises. The composition of Jewish refutations of Christianity is a result of many factors, mostly having to do with Jewish rational self-reflection, an enterprise which was missing in Central and Eastern Europe.³⁴

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Summary

Jewish anti-Christian polemical treatises comprise a well-known genre in medieval Jewish literature. It is generally thought that these books were written in response to Christian missionary pressure. Yet, when considering Central and Eastern Europe in the early modern period, one sees that this genre is almost non-existent, despite continuing Christian attempts at converting Jews. An analysis of medieval Jewish anti-Christian writings shows that rather than being necessarily a response to Christian missionary pressure, many of them are part of the larger Jewish theological enterprise. Hence, such works are prevalent in areas where Jews engaged in theology – the Islamic world, Iberia, Provence, and Italy – and almost non-existent in northern Europe (Ashkenaz), where there was little interest in theology.

³³ See, e.g., Ben-Sasson, “Jewish-Christian Disputation.” See also Carlebach, “Jewish Responses.”

³⁴ My friend and colleague Ted Fram reminds me that in the second half of the sixteenth century there was a slight efflorescence of Polish Jewish rationalism, reflected, for instance, in *Torat ha-’olah* by Moses Isserles (Rema 1520–1572) and in interest in Joseph Albo’s *Book of Principles*. This rationalism was soon replaced in the seventeenth century when Kabbalah went “mainstream” in the Polish Jewish communities. At the same time, Catholics turned more of their attention to Protestants and basically left Jews alone for over a century, perhaps another reason for a lack of Jewish polemical activity specifically in Poland. Rosenthal, “Martin Czechowic,” 94, is of the opinion that “the debates of Jacob of Belzyce and Isaac of Troki reflect the age of religious tolerance in Poland in the second half of the sixteenth century.” Yet, interreligious polemic is not necessarily a product of religious tolerance.

One might also mention the public Jewish-Christian disputation in Lviv/Lvov, 1759, which was instigated by the anti-rabbinic Frankist movement, and, thus, was not typical of Jewish-Christian relations in general.

This pattern continued into the early modern period, at which time Ashkenazic Jews still produced almost no anti-Christian polemical works. The most important early modern, Central and Eastern European anti-Christian book, the very popular *Faith Strengthened*, was written by a Lithuanian Karaite Isaac of Troki (died 1594), reinforcing our knowledge that Central and Eastern European Karaite Jews did not share the Ashkenazi intellectual ethos of their Rabbanite neighbors.

Keywords: Polemics, Jewish-Christian; Relations, Jewish-Christian; Early Modern, Central and Eastern Europe; Interreligious Polemics; Karaism

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