

Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Europe 500 to 1500

Week 1: A Persecuting Society?

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Introduction: Tolerance and Intolerance?

We start with a central question: Why did organised persecution intensify in western Europe from the eleventh century onward, and what does that change reveal about the growth of political and ecclesiastical authority? Do note: Toleration did not mean equality. Medieval communities could accommodate religious, social, and cultural difference while preserving unequal status, legal disabilities, and sharp boundaries between groups.

R. I. Moore and the Persecuting Society

My approach to the topic of tolerance and intolerance is guided by the influential arguments of historian R. I. Moore. According to Moore, Medieval Europe became a persecuting society because authorities increasingly defined difference as dangerous and acquired the institutional power to identify, classify, and suppress it. Persecution occurred in particular places and periods for historical reasons. It was neither constant nor an automatic response to the mere existence of difference.

From the eleventh century, heretics again became visible as threats to Christian unity.

- Jews faced new forms of violence, restriction, forced conversion, and expulsion.
- Lepers increasingly faced legal separation and physical segregation.
- Later medieval and early modern authorities incorporated alleged witches into a related language of pollution, conspiracy, sexual disorder, and demonic influence.
- Moore locates this change in the ambitions and growing capacity of institutions. Authorities learned to search for deviance, organise knowledge about populations, and enforce conformity.

Europe in Two Periods

Category	Early Middle Ages	From the late eleventh century
Political authority	Fragmented and personal. Monarchies usually had limited taxation, administration, and law enforcement.	Centralizing monarchies increasingly imagined the state as an abstract entity. Bureaucracies, taxation, written law, and record keeping expanded. Kingship described in Christian terms.

Society and economy	Most people lived in rural communities. Cities, long distance trade, monetization, and lay literacy were limited.	Population, trade, towns and cities, schools, universities, and lay literacy grew. Trained specialists in reading, law, and administration gained influence.
Religious institutions	Christianity dominated, but clerical education and institutional reach remained uneven. Local aristocrats often controlled churches and appointments.	Church reform challenged simony and lay control. Canon law, clerical discipline, preaching, confession, and mechanisms of oversight expanded.
Knowledge and power	Authorities often lacked the personnel and records needed to monitor populations consistently.	Written records and professional expertise made populations more visible, legible, and governable.

What does this have to do with Persecution?

- According to Moore, growing institutions did more than respond to previously visible threats. They produced categories, assembled evidence, and determined which differences required action.
- Church and state increasingly claimed responsibility for protecting a Christian social order defined by doctrine, moral conduct, and sometimes bodily condition.
- The contrast between learned elites and the supposedly ignorant rustici encouraged suspicion of local belief and practice.
- Persecution became one means through which authorities defined proper order and asserted their jurisdiction over society.

Political Geography

These maps provide orientation rather than a picture of fixed national borders. Political authority remained layered, contested, and uneven throughout the medieval period.



Europe and the Mediterranean around 600 CE



Europe around 1200 CE

Constructing the Dangerous Outsider

After about 1200, authorities increasingly described distinct groups through a shared vocabulary of danger. Heretics, Jews, lepers, and later alleged witches did not form one social group, but polemic could collapse them into a common category of the threatening outsider.

- **Pollution** Difference appeared as contamination that endangered the health of Christian society.
- **Secrecy and conspiracy** Marginal groups allegedly formed hidden networks and plotted against Christians.
- **Sexual and moral disorder** Accusations of illicit sex, corrupted ritual, and inverted morality made opponents appear inhuman.
- **Demonic association** Polemic linked religious and social enemies to the devil and cosmic rebellion.
- **Classification** Repeated labels made highly diverse people seem interchangeable and helped make exclusion appear necessary.

From Community Judgment to Institutional Investigation

We can see how changes in later medieval society produced persecution by looking at legal procedure and how authorities gained the power to identify and punish forms of difference that had no individual accuser or obvious victim. As we shall discuss, power over justice moved away from local communities toward judges, lawyers, clerics, and administrators. Authorities could pursue offences against abstractions such as the faith, the Church, the state, justice, or public order. Dissent and difference could therefore become hidden threats that experts claimed a duty to uncover.

Feature	Ordeal and compurgation	Law and <i>inquisitio</i>
Basis of judgment	Oaths, reputation, divine judgment, and the standing of the accused within the community.	Written law, testimony, trained inquiry, and decisions by judges or ecclesiastical officials. Note: <i>inquisitio</i> means inquiry or investigation. It allowed an authorised official to investigate suspected wrongdoing rather than waiting for a private accuser. This procedure expanded the range of conduct that institutions could detect and prosecute.
Who initiates action	Usually a victim or accuser brings a dispute before the community.	Authorities can initiate an investigation without a private accusation.
Primary goal	Mediation and restoration of communal order.	Discovery of legally defined truth and enforcement of institutional norms.
Location of power	The community participates directly in deciding guilt, innocence, and reconciliation.	Power shifts toward literate secular and ecclesiastical specialists.
Consequences for outsiders	Reputation matters greatly. An isolated or unpopular person remains vulnerable.	Authorities can search for concealed beliefs and redefine dissent as an offence against faith, law, or public order.

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