

Case Studies in Jewish Identity

How do the categories of “race” and “religion” fall short when talking about Jews and other people?

Scholar Shana Sippy’s project theorizes about the rhetoric of “race” and “religion” in general and specifically as it applies to understanding Jewish identity. A key point of her work emphasizes that both these categories, race and religion, were created by people, in specific contexts, with specific purposes. Instead of being two separate categories, as is commonly imagined, Sippy demonstrates through historical examples how these categories are actually interrelated, each affecting how the other one is used and understood. These materials, based on Sippy’s work, invite participants to explore a few of her examples and practice identifying how the categories of race and religion are intertwined and affect each other.

Note: It is strongly encouraged that the facilitator be familiar with Professor Sippy’s full presentation, which includes six lectures. Another helpful introduction to this material is Professor Sylvester Johnson’s lecture, “Limpieza de Sangre and the ‘Clash of Civilizations’; Or, What Hath the Soul to Do with Racialized Bodies?”

<https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/center-jewish-ethics/jews-race-and-religion/lecture-6/>

For teaching this material, a group might watch the clips and discuss some or all of the examples using the guiding introductions, discussion prompts, and take-home points below. If teaching all three examples together, there is a chart provided to help students track the ways categories of “race” and “religion” function, separately and together. The filled-in chart is provided as a guide to the teacher.

GOALS

- Participants will develop a more nuanced understanding of the definition of “race”
- Participants will develop an understanding of how the categories of “race” and “religion” have developed together, over time, to meet particular historical purposes
- Participants will consider how these terms work, and don’t work, to describe Jewish identity

KEY QUESTIONS

- What are some ways medieval and early modern historical events laid a foundation for modern ideas about race?
- What are some examples of how the concept of “religion” has ideas about race built into it?
- What are the difficulties with identifying Jews as a race? As a religion?

MATERIALS

Facilitators may choose to do all or part of the activities included in this lesson, so you will only need the relevant materials.

Video clips:

- Co-constitution of Race and Religion video, <https://vimeo.com/797483943/6f6bd911a2>
 - 9:55-12:25
 - 12:25-15:35
- Jewish Self-fashioning in 18th Century Germany, <https://vimeo.com/797486575/44eb06d3bd>
 - 3:05-8:15
- Appendix A: Two Definitions of Race Worksheet
- Appendix B: Interrelation of Race and Religion Charts
 - Facilitator’s version
 - Learner’s version
- Appendix C: Primary Source Materials for Extension Activities
- Appendix D: Facilitator notes on Primary Source Materials

LESSON

Welcome, introductions to facilitator, students, topic: 10 minutes

- How do you think about Jewishness? Is it a term about religion, family, ethnicity, race, activities, food, culture?
- This lesson is about the limitations of all these terms, and how ideas about race inform conversations about religion.

Opening Activity: Defining Race: 15 minutes

Here are two scholarly definitions (Appendix A) of race that can broaden and deepen our understanding of the term. These definitions are complicated. Use the attached handout to guide your reading. Depending on the group, this activity might be appropriate for participants to do in pairs, with a report back at the end. (For more information, see Sippy lecture 3).

URL

Introduce Scholar Shana Sippy

Professor Sippy's work investigates the history of the ideas of race and religion. In pointing out that ideas about religious difference have always intertwined with ideas about essential bodily difference, Sippy argues that an appeal to Judaism as a religious identity does not actually escape racialized thinking. She brings examples of how the two concepts intertwine. We will use her work to unpack the challenges of understanding Jewishness in terms of race and religion.

Example 1: Medieval Antisemitism (Lecture 4): 15 minutes

- Preview/Introduction: While in our contemporary American context, we think of race as something that distinguishes Blacks from Whites, scholars of the medieval and early modern world point out that Christians related to non-Christians in racial terms. "Limpieza de Sangre" or "the purity of blood" was a concept of the Spanish church that asserted that Christians were constitutionally different from other people. Even those who converted to Christianity could never overcome the inherent difference that distinguished Jews, Muslims, and indigenous peoples from Christians.

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- Watch clip of video, 9:55-12:25, <https://vimeo.com/797483943/6f6bd911a2>

Discussion:

- In listening to the anti-Jewish charges against Jews in medieval Europe, where do you sense elements of race at play? (Refer back to the definitions studied previously.)
- Towards the end of the clip, Sippy emphasizes how Jewishness was embodied, such that even aspects of what we might call Jewish religion became assumed to be essential, unchangeable parts of a person. What are the implications of this kind of assumption? What does it reveal about how the categories of “race” and “religion” should be understood?
- Facilitator take-home points: Without using either term at the time, hatred of medieval Jews incorporated aspects of what we today would consider both race and religion to identify Jewishness. Antisemitic ideas used these categories in overlapping ways, without naming either or distinguishing between them. Neither category—race or religion—existed independently at this point.

Example 2: Spanish Conquest of Peru: 15 minutes, not counting addition of extension activity

- Intro to clip: This video clip further demonstrates how concepts of race and religion have been interwoven, focusing on whiteness and Christianity. Here Professor Sippy discusses how White Christianity was invoked as a justification for both the expansion of Christianity to “civilize” others, known as the “White man’s burden,” and how a belief in a hierarchy of races justified the oppression of non-White peoples. The beginning of the clip refers to the concept of “blood stains” in medieval Christian thought. People who converted to Christianity carried a “blood stain” –something in their physical being that marked them as essentially different from Christians, as having originally been Jewish, Muslim, etc. (ie, not Christian).
- Watch clip of video starting at 12:25-15:35, <https://vimeo.com/797483943/6f6bd911a2>

- Discuss:
 - What can we learn about the categories of race and religion in the example of Peruvian converts carrying a “blood stain”?
 - According to Sippy and the scholars she cites: How did the new category of religion aid in justifying colonialist expansion?
 - How did categories of race function to justify colonialist expansion?
- *Alternative or Extension Activity:* Read and discuss Appendix C, primary source A included below.
- Facilitator take-home points: In the project of building Spanish Catholic dominance, racial and religious differences were intertwined, working together as justifications for colonization and domination. The racial element is exposed when conversion does not actually elevate the status of the colonized.

Example 3: Mendelssohn’s Argument for Jewish Enfranchisement: 15 minutes not counting addition of extension activity

- Intro to video clip: Moses Mendelssohn was a famous Jewish thinker in 18th-century Germany. As a Jew, he lacked basic civil rights. This clip introduces the implications of one of his most famous arguments: that Judaism should be understood as a religion, not a race. He argued that Jews were not inherently different from their Christian neighbors, and that Jews could practice Judaism privately, and become publicly enfranchised.
- Clip of video, 3:05-8:15, <https://vimeo.com/797486575/44eb06d3bd>
- Discuss:
 - What about Judaism did Mendelssohn lift up as a “religion”? How does identifying Judaism in this way sit with you?
 - What are the advantages and drawbacks of this definition of Judaism?
 - What do we learn about the category of “religion” from this example?
 - If Jewishness is defined as a religion, to allow Jews access to political power, what can we learn about how race was functioning in this context?
- *Alternative or Extension Activity:* Read and discuss Appendix C, primary sources B and C included below.

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- Facilitator take-home points: Mendelssohn used the Christian category of “religion” to re-create how Judaism was understood: Jews had been understood as a racial group, implying that they were inherently different and couldn’t have rights. If Jews could stop being a racial group, they might start accessing political power like the Christians, who held power in the society. This kind of shift in identity was not available to all non-White, non-Christian peoples; it was available to some Jews who were able to use their proximity to White, Christian Europeans (in terms of culture and appearance).

Concluding conversation: 15 minutes

After exploring how race and religion have developed as categories that affect each other, let’s unpack Sippy’s contemporary example (see video 2 for her full discussion). In Rabbi Angela Buchdahl’s 2020 sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl argues against understanding Judaism as a race, and puts forward her definition of Jewishness.

- Watch her [sermon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNhG8aW6gbl) from 16:00-17:46

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNhG8aW6gbl>

- What is Judaism, for Rabbi Buchdahl? How does she want her listeners to understand Jewishness?
- How does Rabbi Buchdahl’s argument fit into the historical context? I.e., what is she building off of?
- What do you see as the strengths and challenges of Rabbi Buchdahl’s argument?

Two Scholarly Definitions of Race

This handout is a study guide for two complicated definitions of race. Each definition has been divided into phrases that reflect distinct ideas, in order to support readers in processing the fullness of each definition.

Scholarly Definition	Paraphrase: in my own words I think this means...	Questions and Comments about this definition
Race is “a political system operating on multiple levels		
that emerged from the context of European expansion in the modern era through violence including conquest, slavery, and colonization....		
[And] race signifies superiority and inferiority with reference to phenotype, geography, culture, and also religion,		
which are all written onto the body as a site of difference.”		

Atiya Hussain, “Retrieving the Religion in Racialization: A Critical Review,”
Sociology Compass, 2017.

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Scholarly Definition	Paraphrase: in my own words I think this means...	Questions and Comments about this definition
Race is one of the words we use to describe how forms of knowledge, ethics, politics have been structured.		
It refers to the ways that people have demarcated differences between human beings,		
“that are selectively identified as absolute and fundamental,		
so as to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.		
In race-making, [she argues] strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices: race is thus a structural relationship for the management of human differences—a mechanism of sorting—rather than a substantive content.”		

Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Teacher Resource: Charting “race,” “religion” and their interplay, in three examples

	How is “race” at play?	How is “religion” at play?	How are “race” and “religion” intertwined?
Medieval Antisemitism	Antisemites targeted Jews for having specifically problematic bodies (horns, stench, facial structure)--- elements of a “race,” supposedly essential, fundamental difference from Christian bodies	Jewish social customs and ritual practice were different from that of Christians	Identity (Jewishness) was defined using elements of both “race” and “religion” without using either term or concept as a separate category
Spanish conquest	Christians (Spaniards) justified oppressing non-European peoples because they had a sense of inherent, racial superiority. “Blood stains” (a “racial” concept) stayed with peoples such that even after becoming Christians, they remained in a separate (lower) category	Christian Spaniards justified conquest through the sense that they were spreading Christianity.	Religion (Christianity) justifies racial discrimination (oppression of colonized peoples). Race (blood stains of Jews, Peruvians, etc.) overpowers religion (Christianity) when not all Christians end up with the same power.

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	How is “race” at play?	How is “religion” at play?	How are “race” and “religion” intertwined?
Mendelsohn’s argument	<p>The German Christians and German Jews whom Mendelsohn was writing about were all white-presenting Europeans. This argument that Judaism is not a race might not apply for Jews of other phenotypes or more pronounced cultural differences.</p>	<p>If religion is a private matter, people of any religion should be able to access civil rights.</p>	<p>Avoidance of identifying Judaism as a race suggests that racial differences can’t be overcome, while religious differences can.</p> <p>Identifying Judaism as a religion allows European (White) Jews to access European (White, Christian) rights. This would not apply to all Jews. It was also conditional—those Jews had to fit into the Christian ideas about “religion.”</p>

Charting “race,” “religion” and their interplay

	How is “race” at play?	How is “religion” at play?	How are “race” and “religion” intertwined?
Medieval Antisemitism			
Spanish conquest			
Mendelsohn’s argument			

Primary Sources: The Spanish Conquest of Peru

Source A: Irene Silverblatt, Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 108.

In 1620, “Father Pablo José de Arriaga wrote in his handbook *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*, ‘[I]t has scarcely been possible to extirpate [to destroy completely/pull out at the root] so evil a seed [Judaizing] even in so clean a land [Spain], where the Most Righteous Tribunal of the Holy Office has been so diligently and solicitously vigilant.’ And ‘the problem of setting aright and causing to be forgotten errors of belief learned at a mother’s breast and inherited from father to son can readily be seen in the recent example, we have had...in the expulsion of Moors from Spain.’ If the task of ‘rooting out’ the hidden evils of Judaism and Islam in Spain was so monumental and difficult, though, what might the new world have in store for the guardians of the faith in Indian country? Fortunately, Arriaga assured his readers, ‘the disease of the Indians’ (i.e. their reluctance to denounce native religions for Catholicism) was not ‘so deeply rooted a cancer as that of the Moors and the Jews.’

“Still the question remained: How to explain the persistent treachery? How to explain why the viceroyalty’s Indians, like its Jews and Moors, refused to abandon their ancient faith? The answer was that Indians, like Jews and Moors, carried ‘stained blood.’

“In the colonial confusions over race and religion, the connection of Jews with Indians played a particularly significant role. That linkage was front and center in dilemmas over conversion: Did baptism erase sins and character flaws, or were sins and character flaws part and parcel of stained blood?... [Father] Avila called Jews the ‘mala casta’ (the evil caste), damned, it would seem, forever.”

Primary Sources: Mendelssohn's Argument for Jewish Enfranchisement

Source B: Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism, Arkush, Allan, et al., eds. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 73.

“I have sketched the basic outlines of ancient, original Judaism, such as I conceive it to be. Doctrines and laws, convictions and actions. The former were not connected to words or written characters which always remain the same, for all men and all times, amid all the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and conditions, words and characters which invariably present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them. They were entrusted to living, spiritual instruction, which can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances, and can be varied and fashioned according to a pupil's needs, ability, and power of comprehension.”

Primary Sources: Mendelssohn's Argument for Jewish Enfranchisement

Source C: Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism, Arkush, Allan, et al., eds. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 73.

I have already mentioned above that paganism had a more tolerable conception of the power of the Deity than of its goodness. The common man looks upon goodness and proneness to reconciliation as weakness. He envies everyone the least pre-eminence in power, wealth, beauty, honor, etc., but not pre-eminence in goodness. And how could he do this, since for the most part it depends only on himself to arrive at the degree of gentleness which he finds enviable? It requires some reflection if we are to comprehend that hatred and vindictiveness, envy and cruelty are, at bottom, nothing but weakness and merely the effects of fear. Fear, combined with accidental, uncertain superiority, is the mother of all these barbaric sentiments. Fear alone renders us cruel and implacable. He who is conscious with certainty of his superiority finds far greater felicity in indulgence and pardon.

Once this insight has been achieved, one can no longer hesitate to regard love as being at least as sublime a pre-eminence as power, to credit the Supreme Being, to whom all-power is ascribed, also with all-goodness, and to recognize the God of might also as the God of love. But how far removed was paganism from this refinement! You cannot find in all its theology, in all the poems and other testimonies of earlier times, any trace of its having attributed love and mercy toward the children of man to any of its deities "(120-121).

Facilitator notes on Primary Source Materials

On Source A (for extension activity 5d)

Reflection prompt:

Think about the language that is used to talk about what is evil or bad about the Jews and Moors:

- “Evil seed,”
- “belief learned at the mother’s breast and inherited by the father”—even what is learned is embodied, taken in from the beginning within breastfeeding and inherited
- “so deeply rooted a cancer”—literally a disease of the body that can’t be cured
- “stained blood”
- “evil caste”

On Source B (for extension activity 6d)

Reflection prompt:

Think here about how Mendelsson is trying to describe Judaism as that has been “entrusted to living” people and “can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances” as opposed to something that is unchanging, static, always remaining the same.

- Why does he feel the need to do this?
- How is this an attempt to separate a racial understanding of Jewishness from Judaism as a religion?

On Source C (for extension activity 6d)

Reflection prompt:

- What are the implications of what Mendelssohn is saying about other religions here?
- What about those religions who don’t subscribe to monotheism? Is it only people who accept the Bible or a “universal religion of mankind” who can gain entrée into society?
- How does this notion of Judaism as a religion implicitly and explicitly depend upon Christian supremacist logics?