The Words That Killed Medieval Jews

By SARA LIPTON  DEC. 11, 2015

DO harsh words lead to violent acts? At a moment when hate speech seems to be proliferating, it’s a question worth asking.

Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch recently expressed worry that heated anti-Muslim political rhetoric would spark an increase in attacks against Muslims. Some claim that last month’s mass shooting in Colorado Springs was provoked by Carly Fiorina’s assertion that Planned Parenthood was “harvesting baby parts”; Mrs. Fiorina countered that language could not be held responsible for the deeds of a “deranged” man. Similar debates have been occasioned by the beating of a homeless Hispanic man in Boston, allegedly inspired by Donald J. Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric, and by the shooting deaths of police officers in California, Texas and Illinois, which some have attributed to anti-police sentiment expressed at Black Lives Matter protests.

No historian can claim to have insight into the motives of living individuals. But history does show that a heightening of rhetoric against a certain group can incite violence against that group, even when no violence is called for. When a group is labeled hostile and brutal, its members are more likely to be treated with hostility and brutality. Visual images are particularly powerful, spurring actions that may well be unintended by the images’ creators.

The experience of Jews in medieval Europe offers a sobering example. Official Christian theology and policy toward Jews remained largely unchanged in the
Middle Ages. Over roughly 1,000 years, Christianity condemned the major tenets of Judaism and held “the Jews” responsible for the death of Jesus. But the terms in which these ideas were expressed changed radically.

Before about 1100, Christian devotions focused on Christ’s divine nature and triumph over death. Images of the crucifixion showed Jesus alive and healthy on the cross. For this reason, his killers were not major focuses in Christian thought. No anti-Jewish polemics were composed during these centuries; artworks portrayed his executioners not as Jews, but as Roman soldiers (which was more historically accurate) or as yokels. Though there are scattered records of anti-Jewish episodes like forced conversions, we find no consistent pattern of anti-Jewish violence.

In the decades around 1100, a shift in the focus of Christian veneration brought Jews to the fore. In an effort to spur compassion among Christian worshipers, preachers and artists began to dwell in vivid detail on Christ’s pain. Christ morphed from triumphant divine judge to suffering human savior. A parallel tactic, designed to foster a sense of Christian unity, was to emphasize the cruelty of his supposed tormentors, the Jews.

Partly out of identification with this newly vulnerable Christ, partly in response to recent Turkish military successes, and partly because an internal reform movement was questioning fundamentals of faith, Christians began to see themselves as threatened, too. In 1084 the pope wrote that Christianity “has fallen under the scorn, not only of the Devil, but of Jews, Saracens, and pagans.” The “Goad of Love,” a retelling of the crucifixion that is considered the first anti-Jewish Passion treatise, was written around 1155-80. It describes Jews as consumed with sadism and blood lust. They were seen as enemies not only of Christ, but also of living Christians; it was at this time that Jews began to be accused of ritually sacrificing Christian children.

Ferocious anti-Jewish rhetoric began to permeate sermons, plays and polemical texts. Jews were labeled demonic and greedy. In one diatribe, the head of the most influential monastery in Christendom thundered at the Jews: “Why are
you not called brute animals? Why not beasts?” Images began to portray Jews as hooknosed caricatures of evil.

The first records of large-scale anti-Jewish violence coincide with this rhetorical shift. Although the pope who preached the First Crusade had called only for an “armed pilgrimage” to retake Jerusalem from Muslims, the first victims of the Crusade were not the Turkish rulers of Jerusalem but Jewish residents of the German Rhineland. Contemporary accounts record the crusaders asking why, if they were traveling to a distant land to “kill and to subjugate all those kingdoms that do not believe in the Crucified,” they should not also attack “the Jews, who killed and crucified him?”

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jews were massacred in towns where they had peacefully resided for generations. At no point did Christian authorities promote or consent to the violence. Christian theology, which applied the Psalm verse “Slay them not” to Jews, and insisted that Jews were not to be killed for their religion, had not changed. Clerics were at a loss to explain the attacks. A churchman from a nearby town attributed the massacres to “some error of mind.”

But not all the Rhineland killers were crazy. The crusaders set out in the Easter season. Both crusade and Easter preaching stirred up rage about the crucifixion and fear of hostile and threatening enemies. It is hardly surprising that armed and belligerent bands turned such rhetoric into anti-Jewish action.

For the rest of the Middle Ages, this pattern was repeated: Preaching about the crusades, proclamations of Jewish “enmity” or unsubstantiated anti-Jewish accusations were followed by outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence, which the same shocked authorities that had aroused Christians’ passions were then unable to restrain. We see this in the Rhineland during the Second Crusade (1146), in England during the Third Crusade (1190), in Franconia in 1298, in many locales following the Black Death in 1348, and in Iberia in 1391. Sometimes the perpetrators were zealous holy warriors, sometimes they were opportunistic business rivals, sometimes they were parents grieving for children lost to accident or crime, or fearful of the ravages of a new disease.
Some may well have been insane. But sane or deranged, they did not pick their victims in a vacuum. It was repeated and dehumanizing excoriation that led those medieval Christians to attack people who had long been their neighbors.

Today's purveyors of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-police and anti-abortion rhetoric and imagery may not for a moment intend to provoke violence against Muslims, immigrants, police officers and health care providers. But in the light of history, they should not be shocked when that violence comes to pass.

Sara Lipton, a professor of history at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, is the author of "Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 13, 2015, on Page SR5 of the New York edition with the headline: The Words That Killed Medieval Jews.