The Inquisition and New Religious Orders

From *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World’s Peoples*

Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) tried to capitalize on the crusading spirit to strengthen papal authority both within the church and over secular society. The Crusaders had rallied together under the sign of the cross, the common symbol of all Christians regardless of national origin and allegiances. Innocent likewise invoked the Crusaders’ language of universal brotherhood to redefine Christendom as an empire of “the Christian people” subject to the authority of the pope in both spiritual and worldly matters. ... (He) established a judicial body, the Inquisition, to investigate and punish anyone who challenged the pope’s supreme authority. The Inquisition expanded, with the eager support of lay monarchs, into a broad-based campaign directed against heretics and nonbelievers alike. Thus, it became, in many ways, an internal Crusade. In the view of European elites, just as military expeditions to the Holy Land would strengthen Christendom by bringing sacred sites outside of Europe under Christian control, the Inquisition would strengthen Christendom by eliminating religious diversity within Europe.

Jewish communities in Christian Europe were early targets of Innocent’s Inquisition. Many Christians regarded Jews as an alien race whose presence corrupted Christian society. Jews had suffered various kinds of legal discrimination since Roman times, but their persecution intensified from the 11th century onward. Christian rulers prohibited Jews from owning land, forcing them to take up occupations as urban craftsmen and merchants. Jews were often vilified because of their prominence in trades such as moneylending, which tainted them with the stigma of usury. In many places Jews lacked legal protections and were subject to the arbitrary whims of kings and princes. Innocent’s new orders, which compelled Jews to wear distinctive forms of dress such as special badges or hats, were intended to reinforce existing laws forbidding marriage between Christians and Jews.

Efforts to impose religious conformity on Latin Christendom received further impetus from the formation of new religious orders, most notably the Franciscans and the Dominicans. (These) new orders dedicated themselves to the principles of poverty and evangelism. Unlike the Cistercians, who remained confined to their monasteries, Franciscans and Dominican friars traveled widely, preaching to the populace and depending on almsgiving for their livelihood. The preaching orders sought to carry out the church’s mission to regulate and reform the behavior of lay believers. The Dominicans assumed a conspicuous role in leading the Inquisition. The Franciscan and Dominican orders were also in the forefront of campaigns to convert the non-Christian peoples of eastern Europe.

**Reflection:** How does this account differ from the treatment of these new religious orders in *Traditions & Encounters?*