AQUINAS ON THE FORCED CONVERSION OF JEWS:
BELIEF, WILL, AND TOLERATION

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Forced Conversions in the Middle Ages

There are numerous historical accounts of the forced conversion of Jews in the high Middle Ages. One such narrative, of an event occurring in York in 1190, is offered by Richard of Hoveden (fl. 1174–1201), as follows:

While the king [Richard I] was seated at table, the chief men of the Jews came to offer presents to him, but as they had been forbidden the day before to come to the king's court on the day of the coronation, the common people, with scornful eye and insatiable heart, rushed upon the Jews and stripped them, and then scourging them, cast them forth out of the king's hall. Among these was Benedict, a Jew of York, who, after having been so maltreated and wounded by the Christians that his life was despaired of, was baptized by William, prior of the church of Saint Mary at York, in the church of the Innocents, and was named William, and thus escaped the peril of death and the hands of the persecutors.¹

Notwithstanding Richard's account, the Fourth Council of Toledo of 633 CE repudiated the practice of the forced conversion of Jews to Christianity, and this canon was included in the Decretum of Gratian:

Jews are not to be forced into the faith, although even if they accept it unwillingly, they must be forced to retain it. Whence in the Fourth Toledan Council it was enacted: Just as Jews are not to be forced into the faith, so too, once converted, they are not permitted to leave it. Concerning the Jews the Sacred Council orders that no one henceforth force them to believe. “The Lord shows mercy as He chooses, but also makes men stubborn as He chooses.” For those who are unwilling are not saved, only those who are willing, so that justice remains perfect. For just as man, heeding the serpent, perished through the exercise of his own will, so too, called by the grace of God, one should be saved in faith by the conversion of his own spirit. Thus,

in order that they be converted by the free exercise of the will and not by force, they are to be persuaded but not impelled.\(^2\)

Unfortunately, as evidenced by the pressures exacted on Benedict of York, coerced or forced conversions were still occurring in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, the acts of “persuasion” described in the canon of Toledo sometimes included the unsavoury practice of compelling Jews to hear evangelistic sermons, whenever a preacher desired to offer one in public.\(^3\) This practice was institutionalized by papal letter in 1245, the same year in which Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) arrived at the University of Paris for the first time.\(^4\) Three years earlier, in 1242, Hebrew books were burned in Paris after having been turned over to Dominican and Franciscan friars for their perusal and evaluation, under the order of King Louis IX.\(^5\)

In 1269, Louis IX ordered the attendance of all Jews at evangelistic sermons preached by Pablo Christiani, a Dominican and former Jew.\(^6\) At that time, Aquinas was teaching at the University of Paris and writing his famous *Summa theologiae*, which includes much of his discussion of forced conversion.\(^7\) Pablo Christiani preached to assemblies of Jews at both the royal court in Paris and at the court of the Dominicans, so it would seem that Aquinas must have been aware of this practice and the edict behind it.\(^8\) Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that Aquinas would have been ignorant of the sponsorship of these practices by the King of France, who also provided the Dominicans in Paris with much of their livelihood.\(^9\)


\(^4\) Ibid., 38–39.


\(^6\) Chazan 1989, 44–45.


\(^8\) Chazan 1989, 44.

\(^9\) Weisheipl, 59.