

NIRENBERG, David, *Neighboring faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism in the Middle Ages and today* (Chicago, 2014), 352 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-16893-7 (cloth) ISBN-13: 978-0-226-16909-5 (e-book) DOI: 0.7208/Chicago/9780226169095.001.0001

The book is, in essence, a collection of David Nirenberg's essays. An effort has been made to help chapters converge, and though in some cases this is accomplished, in others the fact that we are reading an article not written as a continuation of the previous one becomes quite obvious. In truth, this does not diminish the worth of the book one iota. The value of the book is not in creating one long argument spanning the whole text but in the brilliant arguments developed and examples exposed in each chapter. The fact that on occasion conclusions and cases from one chapter will reappear, or become relevant in the next is but an unexpected bonus.

David Nirenberg is a specialist in interfaith relations and cultural exchange's role in defining religious communities' self-portrayal in Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, though much of his work concerns the Iberian Peninsula. This is what the text concentrates upon. Professor Nirenberg's previous books all concern themes related to the aforementioned. In spite of this there exists an evolution, fully recognized by the author beginning from a merely social approach, and taking on hermeneutic approaches in later work. In this last book we can discover the culmination of a process bringing these two aspects of his work together.

The common focus of the different chapters is the idea that identity is formed in opposition to the other, but not only to the present physical other – who very often is not located in the vicinity – but also, and very importantly, to the imagined other. Even when the other *is* to be found nearby, the true neighbour and the imagined neighbour are not necessarily similar. Idealised notions of the neighbour become necessary to create the self-identity of a community. The idealised notion of neighbour is independent of the perception of the true neighbour, in spite of not being completely unaffected by the possibility of her presence and the various forms of interactions this implies. Each chapter shows different examples that develop this main theme in the interaction between Christians, Muslims and Jews mostly in the Iberian Peninsula, and again mostly during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth

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Century.

In spite of this theoretical and methodological thread linking all the articles the main objective of the articles cannot be generally considered to further this idea of identity. Each article has its own objective, generally to depict and explain an historic episode, or process.

On a separate note many of the chapters, excluding the first and last, explore aspects of the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment in the Iberian Peninsula, culminating with the late Fifteenth Century expulsions of non-Christians. This theme is threaded in parallel to the previous approach in the entire book, excepting its beginning and end. The first chapter - 'Christendom and Islam' - explores the idea that the concept of European Christendom as one unified force sprung from the interaction between different European Christian polities faced with the threat of encroaching Islamic presence, but even more so, the tales of this presence delivered to communities far from this threat. In a related way, it also enquires into the idea that Muslims lived in Christian lands, in an attempt to discover how much Christians knew about Islam, how much of it from experience, as opposed to second hand information, and how those Muslims dwelling in Christian Europe lived Islam outside the reach of Sharia Law.

The book continues with 'Love between Muslim and Jew', devoted to exploring the bureaucratic traces of interfaith love, namely disputes over interfaith adultery, conversion and marriage, in Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities under Christian rule in medieval Iberia. The idea behind this is that, due to love and marriage being of great allegorical value in all three of the faiths studied, we may discover aspects of the interaction of these faiths not captured in more common economic or diplomatic exchanges. We find that whereas in the late Fourteenth Century Christian sentiment towards Jews, allowed for Muslim marriage and conversion to Islam, but not necessarily v.v., in the early Fifteenth Century, little more than a generation later, the process has been reversed. Jewish conversion to Islam is tolerated much more often than the contrary. This process is bolstered by growing assimilation of Mudejar Muslims, Muslims living in Christian lands. These

communities show a greater devotion to the Virgin Mary, than traditional Islam, and make their own Christian anti- Judaic tenets. The change is also explained by the growth of distrust in Jews, and desire to be seen as apart from them, after the massive conversions of Jews to Christendom- which are dealt with thoroughly in the second half of the book - taking place in the late Fourteenth Century. The third chapter describes an example concerning the theme of the prior, or at least the rumour of such an episode of interfaith love, in this case between a Christian King, the well-known Alfonso VIII and the Jewess he allegedly co-inhabited with in Toledo. The truth of the episode is doubtful, seeing as it:

1-Was mostly spread by his enemies. 2-Is best known from documents following the death of the King. 3-Originates from strongly anti-Judaic standpoints.

In any case, it serves to illustrate the role of love, marriage and sex in the interplay of faiths in a multicultural society, and the ways Judaism becomes a symbol of what is not Christian in parallel to its persistence alongside other faiths. In the following chapter Nirenberg describes the flood of anti-Judaic violence, and the mass-conversions that the massacre of Jews in Valencia in 1391 spawned. The title 'Massacre or Miracle' parallels a dichotomy in interpreting the events at the time. Some, in particular supporters of the Crown, saw the events as attacks to the King, a massacre of some of his most profitable subjects. Others saw it as a miracle brought forth by God himself so that a great number of otherwise condemned Jews might see the light of Christian faith and so be saved. The chapter carefully studies the different ideas of Judaism in place while condemning or justifying the widespread attacks, and goes a small way to explaining how and why they occurred when and the way they did.

Chapter five in some ways continues the second chapter, though the topic is more specifically sexual boundaries between faiths, rather than love and marriage. In both conversion is an important factor. An interesting idea is that before the 1391 conversions prostitutes could establish sexual boundaries between Christians and non- Christians with certain ease and expertise due to circumcision being a non-Christian custom. After the

conversions this was impossible. New Christians might well be circumcised. This was symptomatic of a whole swathe of elements mixing Judaism and Christianity, leading Christian leaders to greater segregation of remaining Jews, and prompting changes in classification. Separation of faiths had until then had a sexual motif, which became reproductive when sexual separation proved impossible.

In 'Figures of Thought and Figures of Flesh', the sixth chapter, the author gives body to the idea pervading the book – as mentioned before – the idea that Jews and Muslims were not only physical neighbours many Christians might bump into while walking down a crowded street, but also figures of thought, representations of attributes defining their own faith, which might, or might not have similarities to the physical presence. At the same time the chapter defines the ideas of Jewishness present in Iberia at the time, in anticipation of the following chapters, 'Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities' and 'Was there race before Modernity? The example of "Jewish" blood in Late Medieval Spain'.

This chapter, the seventh, ties the previous two together, which explained in what ways the changing definitions of physical Jewishness challenged the more stable ideal of Jewishness defining Christian faith, and forced Christians and Jews alike to separate one another along reproductive rather than sexual lines. This chapter explains how that change wrought a massive change in the identification of the self along genealogical lines amongst Old Christians, Christian converts from Judaism (Conversos, or Marranos) and Jews alike.

The following chapter puts a capstone on this idea, as well as defends it from possible lines of attack by dealing with the idea of race. Many authors believe that it's incorrect to write of racism in times prior to modern Biology, or Darwinism. Nirenberg criticises this approach as defining racism in an ad hoc way, giving the term little historical use. He also warns us away from using the term in an excessively liberal way. He then makes a case for defining Late medieval Spain's first use of 'raza' as used to classify humans as opposed to animals as a possible defining moment for the concept of racism, or rather, as the author seems wary of such genealogies

of ideas, as proof that the concept can be found to predate modern biology.

The final chapter, one of the more interesting ones in the book attempts to prove that both the discourse of 'Alliance of Civilizations' and that of 'Clash of Civilisations' – precipitated in the previous decade by a growing perception of conflict between the USA and its allies and a number of actors in the Muslim world – are in fact fantasies flawed by the same fallacies. It analyses Pope Benedict XVI's infamous speech of September 12<sup>th</sup> 2006, in which the author discovers a strong exclusionary element, linking western laity to fanatical devotion to reason, and Islam to fanatical devotion to faith, assigning to Roman Catholicism the perfect equilibrium between both. Nirenberg finds parallels between this discourse and Hegel's dialectical opposition between Hellenism and Judaism. The chapter also analyses those who do not oppose European Christianity to Oriental Islam, but support the idea of a unitary Islamo-Christian Civilization separated by little more than bigotry. He makes the case that authors espousing this idea are using the same tools as those they are against to reach an opposite conclusion, often stretching the evidence to support their notions. David Nirenberg asks that we try to understand the evidence in its own right, at least when doing History, and not try to make our findings subject to oppositional ideas of what is Christian, Islamic, Hellenic or Jewish. It is quite easy to prove that Islam, Judaism and Christianity have had important influences upon one another. It is even possible, as was done in the first chapter, to show how they need the other, even if only in idealised form, to define themselves. It is on the other hand absurd to claim that they are eternally opposed, or that they are one and the same thing, more so when it is quite clear that there are other aims, social, political, other than historical discovery at hand.

All in all, I would heartily recommend the book. It contains some of David Nirenberg's best and most recent work, showcasing some very interesting ideas for anyone studying interfaith interaction, or Medieval European or Mediterranean history. Professor Nirenberg quite obviously has an excellent grasp of the topics and languages used and therefore the book is written clearly, using easy-to-

understand yet enjoyable language. It is magnificently sourced, and has some very interesting notes for those who wish to delve deeper into the topics discussed.

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