

Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xviii + 430.

Alexandra Cuffel succeeds in constructing a masterful analysis of the complex development of religious polemics among medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Her analysis is greatly augmented by her use of gender frameworks and methodologies to interrogate how these three communities used similar rhetorical structures in their polemical opposition to each other. It is in her examination of these convergences that Cuffel provides the most noteworthy insight into shared cultural and biological constructions of gender. She contends that polemicists deployed customary metaphors of the body precisely because they would have been legible not only to members of their own communities, but also to their opponents in religious debates. As a result, this work represents an important contribution both to studies of medieval gender and to studies of the interactions between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the medieval world.

Cuffel's work reflects a current trend in religious scholarship that

seeks to combat the lachrymose school of Christian and Jewish relations by examining the shared cultural and intellectual traditions between different religious groups. While this approach is still the subject of much academic debate, Cuffel adroitly navigates problems with this methodology by addressing potential critics in her introduction. In addition, she demonstrates that religious polemics pose a uniquely interesting area for studying such commonalities as these texts reflect the most vehement rejections of the other religions' beliefs and rituals. "One of the theses of my book," Cuffel states, "is that Muslims, Christians, and Jews used the same or similar tactics to denigrate one another and that each side was drawing from a shared pool of beliefs and values about the body, sickness, certain foods, and animals"(p. 3). In their attempts to create divisions, polemicists reflected the common cultural heritage of the larger medieval world. Her analysis, however, goes further than simply noting common symbols or similar rhetorical structures; she examines how Muslims, Jews, and Christians all gave different meanings to these shared tropes. Drawing on the separate works on disgust by Mary Douglas and William Miller, Cuffel further posits that polemics

used gendered metaphors of filth and disgust, especially concerning menstruation and effluence, to construct social boundaries around members.

Cuffel divides her work into two main parts: the first part covers constructions of the body, especially the female body, in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and the second part examines the legacy of these constructions in the polemics of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. In part 1, Cuffel highlights two especially important contributions of Late Antique thought to medieval religious polemics. First, she shows that discussions of the female body were predominately associated with negative connotations of filth and disgust. Early polemics linked menstruation, lactation, and various illnesses of the female body to Aristotelian biological theories on the digestion of food and the failure of the female body to purify it fully into fertile seed. Second, she emphasizes how these biological explanations for menstruation and excrement were incorporated by contemporary Christian, pagan, and Jewish religious authorities into their understandings of purity and impurity. Metaphors of materiality reinforced gender norms that tied purity to rationality and pollution

to ungodliness. As Cuffel notes, “Abhorrence for the leaking body constituted a shared language through which Pagans, Jews, and Christians ‘heaped abuse’ not only on the human form in general but also on the bodies and moral status of their religious adversaries” (p. 25). Metaphors of the filthy body, therefore, were a central part of early religious polemics, and they continued to have considerable force in later medieval debates.

After laying the foundation for medieval polemics, Cuffel spends the majority of the work discussing the function of twelfth-to-fourteenth-century polemics by Muslims, Christians, and Jews. She has divided part two into four chapters that consider different aspects of these texts. In chapter 3, Cuffel analyzes how new translations of Greek, Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew texts shaped the ongoing debates between Christians, Jews, and Muslims about the nature of Jesus’s and Mary’s bodies, and consequently, the Christian theologies of the Incarnation and Eucharist. In chapter four, Cuffel continues her analysis of how biological understandings of the gendered body impacted contemporary debates on the bodies of Jesus and Mary. This chapter also highlights how Christian and Muslims polemicists used the

imagery of pollution of holy spaces as propaganda tools during the Crusades. In this chapter, Cuffel provides an excellent comparison of the difference between Christian-Jewish polemics, which attempted to feminize the other religion, and thus, negate the other's connection to the divine, and Christian-Muslim polemics, which Cuffel sees as creating "a rhetoric of hypermasculinity and violence" (p. 118). In chapter 5, Cuffel examines how medieval polemicists explained the locus for various illnesses in the impure bodies of their religious rivals. She argues that the combination of spiritual impurity with biological illness was important as it worked "doubly to 'damn' the targeted group" (p. 157). Finally, in chapter 6, she highlights how these discussions were also often connected to different animals, which worked to heighten their charges of irrationality and filthiness.

Overall, Cuffel has produced a seminal work in the use of gendered metaphors of the body in medieval religious polemics. While her work does consider Christian, Jewish, and Muslim polemics in rich detail, the focus of her discussion emphasizes Christian-Jewish polemics with less attention provided to Christian-Muslim polemics. This makes it difficult for the reader to connect

the discussion of polemics in part one, which considers mainly pagan, Christian, and Jewish beliefs, to part two, which also considers Muslim polemics. Nonetheless, the breath of her analysis is truly impressive. This work will certainly be important to scholars interested in the construction of the medieval body and in the development and defense of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theology. Moreover, I believe that it can also be a useful resource for introducing these topics to graduate, and even undergraduate students, and I intend to use it as such in the future.

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Sarah Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation and Discussion.* (The New Middle Ages series.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xvi + 246.

That some subset of humanity is compulsively driven to fabricate artificial languages is perhaps not news to us today. However, it was a great surprise to J. R. R. Tolkien in the