4-1-2012

Why Jewish Studies Scholars Should Care about Christian–Muslim Relations

David M. Freidenreich

Colby College, dfreiden@colby.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty_scholarship

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Freidenreich, David M., "Why Jewish Studies Scholars Should Care about Christian–Muslim Relations" (2012). Faculty Scholarship. 34.
https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty_scholarship/34

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Why Jewish Studies Scholars Should Care about Christian-Muslim Relations

David M. Freidenreich

Huguccio had a problem. As a leading late-twelfth-century expert on Church law, he knew well the traditional distinction Christians made between Jews and pagans, as well as its various legal implications. Jews, after all, held an inferior status to pagans within medieval canon law. As several of Huguccio’s colleagues explained, “through the abuse of scripture [Jews] subvert faith in Christ … Gentiles, however, are not like this.” For this reason, Christians may eat with pagans but not with Jews. Similarly, it is legal under certain circumstances for a Christian to be the slave of a pagan, but a Christian may never be enslaved to a Jew according to the laws in force during the high Middle Ages.

Huguccio’s problem was how to account for the status of Muslims, known as Saracens in Latin. Muslims, of course, are neither Christians nor Jews. By the logic of medieval canon law, this means that Muslims must be gentiles, which is to say pagans. Yet Huguccio also knew that “nearly all Saracens at the present Judaism: they are circumcised, they distinguish among foods, and they imitate other Jewish rituals. There ought not be any legal difference between them.”

Huguccio resolved his dilemma by collapsing the centuries-old legal distinction between Jews and pagans. While not without its detractors—various jurists and theologians continued to regard Jews as posing a uniquely grave threat to Christian souls—Huguccio’s definition of Muslims as legally equivalent to Jews became normative. Muslims living in Latin Christendom became subject to the same laws as Jews over the course of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Meanwhile, in the Muslim world, scholars of Islamic law were debating the legal status of Christians and, in particular, Christian acts of animal slaughter. Sunnis asserted that Christianity, like Judaism, is similar to Islam. After all, the Quran elevates the status of People of the Book over that of other non-Muslims by, for example, permitting Muslims to consume meat prepared by Jews and Christians. Shi’is countered that prepared by Christian butchers is permissible. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), for example, declared that Christian butchers who invoke Christ are in fact heretical Christians whose meat is therefore forbidden to Muslims; orthodox Christians, however, invoke God alone, in accordance with the Quran.

Why should scholars of Jewish Studies care about the attitudes of Christians and Muslims toward one another? Let me offer three reasons, which, I believe, apply not only to the debates summarized above but more broadly as well.

Ideas about Jews and Judaism play an important role in the ways Christian and Muslim authorities viewed one another during the Middle Ages and, arguably, during modern times as well. Christian attitudes regarding Islam are intertwined with Christian conceptions of Judaism: the question Huguccio poses is, in effect, “How Jewish are Muslims?”

Islamic authorities ask a different question—“How Muslim are Christians?”—but they, too, have Jews in mind. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, for example, discusses Christian butchers who invoke Christ alongside Jewish butchers who slaughter non-kosher animals. More broadly, Islamic authorities place Jews and Christians within the same legal category, “People of the Book.”

Christians and Muslims pose different questions about one another. Unlike his Muslim counterparts, who compare Christianity to their own religion, Huguccio compares Islamic practices with those of the Jews. These comparisons reflect fundamentally different approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between Us and Them. Islamic law employs a sliding spectrum in which non-Muslims are like Muslims to varying degrees. In the context
of discussing laws governing the blood-

money due to the relatives of a murder

victim, Muslim jurists even assign numerical

values to these degrees: Jews and Christians,

according to many Sunni authorities, are

worth either one-third or one-half the value

of Muslims, while Zoroastrians and other

non-Muslims are worth only one-fifteenth.

Shi’i sources, tellingly, declare that Jews,

Christians, and Zoroastrians alike are worth

only one-fifteenth the value of a Muslim.

Canon law, in contrast, envisions a world

polarized between Christians and Jews

and imagines Judaism as antithetical to

Christianity. Jews are not fractional Christians

but rather anti-Christians (-1, to stick with

our numerical values). Other non-Christians,

the “gentiles,” are neutral (0), so long as

they aren’t reclassified as being quasi-Jewish

and thus thrust toward the negative pole.

Recognition of this dynamic does more

than improve our understanding of Christian

and Islamic ideas about Jews. It also enables

scholars of Jewish Studies to query Jewish

notions about gentiles more effectively.

Pre-Rabbinic and Rabbinic literature alike

attest to a binary distinction between Jews

and gentiles analogous to the Hellenistic

distinction between Greeks and barbarians.

Jewish sources thus represent gentiles simply

and literally as non-Jews: in numerical terms,

0. This paradigm differs both from the sliding

spectrum used by Muslims to represent People

of the Book as like Muslims and also from

the antithetical framework employed by

Christians to present Jews as anti-Christians.

How and why do Jewish thinkers employ this

distinctive worldview? In what contexts, for

what reasons, and to what ends do Jewish

thinkers supplement their binary paradigm

with elements of likeness or antithesis?

To what extent, if any, might intellectual

exchange within Christian or Muslim cultures

account for these adaptations to the classic

Jewish approach to conceptualizing non-Jews?

Familiarity with ideas regarding Christian–

Muslim relations enables us to ask better

questions about the ideas espoused by Jews.

The study of Christian-Muslim relations

constitutes an important cognate field

to Jewish Studies. Our discipline fosters

scholarship about majority-minority relations

and the distinctive attributes of minority

life. Awareness of the dynamics that animate

other instances of majority-minority relations

furthers our ability to interpret our own

data and to communicate our findings to

colleagues who study other civilizations.

Only if we understand Christian-Muslim

relations can we answer, in a scholarly idiom

quite different from that of Ibn al-`Arabi or

Huguccio, such questions as “How Christian

are Jews?” and “How Jewish are Muslims?”

David M. Freidenreich is the Pulver Family

Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies at Colby

College. He is the author of

Foreigners and Their

Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish,

Christian, and Islamic Law (University of