

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIANS ON “INFIDEL” RITES—SELECTED SESSION

Topic:	Medieval Theologians on “Infidel” Rites
Convener:	Rita George-Tvrtković, Benedictine University
Moderator:	Holly Taylor Coolman, Providence College
Presenter:	Franklin T. Harkins, Fordham University
Presenter:	Rita George-Tvrtković, Benedictine University
Respondent:	Devorah Schoenfeld, Loyola University Chicago

This session engaged Christian and Jewish scholars in conversation about medieval Christian views of Jewish and Muslim rites, shedding light on the following: medieval Christian knowledge (or ignorance) of non-Christian praxis; Christian self-understandings of the sacraments; connections between the anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic traditions in Christian theology; and contemporary Jewish responses to historical Christian theologies of religion.

In his paper, “Sacred Reading and the Sacraments of the Old Law: Two Victorine Perspectives,” Franklin T. Harkins sketched the basic contours of the intersection between scriptural hermeneutics and the status of the sacraments of the Old Law in Hugh and Godfrey of St. Victor, with an eye to contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue. He honed in on two Victorine metaphors for the people of God (Jewish and Christian) throughout history—namely, Hugh’s image of a transhistorical army led by Christ at its center, and Godfrey’s image of the people of the old rite and the people of the new rite flanking the river of theological wisdom. Harkins ended with a discussion of how both images are potentially fruitful for interreligious understanding and engagement between what has been described as the “two intimately separate traditions” of Judaism and Christianity.

Rita George-Tvrtković’s paper, “Deficient Sacraments or Unifying Rites? Medieval Theologians on Jewish and Muslim Praxis,” examined the writings of three medieval Christians who described both Jewish and Muslim rites: Alan of Lille, Riccoldo da Montecroce, and Nicholas of Cusa. She suggested that Alan and Nicholas are more similar to each other than to Riccoldo, possibly because they were unfamiliar with the lived reality of the religions they describe, unlike Riccoldo, who lived among Muslims for a decade and studied their texts. She concluded that Lille is pessimistic (infidel rites are deficient sacraments), Cusa is optimistic (infidel rites have the potential to unify), and Riccoldo is “stupefied,” ambivalent, and uneven in his assessment of Jewish and Muslim rites due to the asymmetry between his knowledge and experience of the two.

Devorah Schoenfeld, a Jewish scholar of medieval rabbinics, began her response by noting that theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology are typically seen as modern topics, but the figures examined by Harkins and George-Tvrtković demonstrate that they were very much alive in the medieval world. Schoenfeld went on to describe two medieval Jews who likewise grappled with how their own religion should understand Christianity: Menachem Meiri, whose examination of a legal question became an unexpected location for him to deal with the issue of whether or not Christianity is idolatry, and David Kimhi, whose exegesis of the passage on the near-sacrifice of Isaac included acknowledgment of the importance of Abraham to Christians, and of similarities in the ways Christians and Jews read the Bible. Schoenfeld observed that these two examples of positive medieval Jewish views of Christianity do not necessarily represent a nuanced or entirely accurate view of Christian theology. This led her to ask the following question: what is the relationship between empathy and understanding? Based

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on the various texts discussed in the session, Schoenfeld concluded that sometimes understanding can lead to empathy, and the absence of understanding to a lack of empathy. But sometimes a lack of complete understanding actually allows for a more tolerant position.

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