
Alexandra Cuffel’s highly original and enlightening study of medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim uses of gendered bodily metaphors of impurity shows how these religious traditions all agreed on viewing corporeality as distasteful and largely incompatible with divinity. In particular the female body was seen as polluted and antithetical to holiness. The focus of the book is on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but Cuffel’s study traces medieval views on the body, sickness, and pollution back to late antiquity, where they formed a strategy for establishing boundaries between pagans, Jews, and Christians. By describing the religion of their opponents as disgusting and polluted, polemicists evoked emotional antipathy: contempt, fear, and repulsion, so as to prevent anybody from crossing the religious divide.

The consequences of polemic based on bodily images changed from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, as images of filth increasingly became an incitement to verbal or physical violence. During the Middle Ages western Christians and Muslims used such imagery to convince listeners to join in holy war. In that case, metaphors of pollution were meant to provoke violent action. Interestingly, Jews used similar tactics to demonstrate their superiority, but as a minority religion they had to disguise the negative portrayals of their opponents. When medieval Christian authors suggested that Jews suffered from diseases that required a Christian child’s blood or the host to cure them, this often resulted in the death or injury of Jews. Jews, on the other hand, who accused Christians of being worshippers of a putrid corpse, endangered themselves and their entire local community. Similar dangers faced Jews and Christian who openly criticized Islam while living under Muslim rule (pp. 6–9).

In her book Cuffel investigates how such polemics functioned within each group, but one of the main themes of the book is that Muslims, Christians, and Jews used similar tactics, and that all three traditions were drawing from a shared pool of beliefs about the body, pollution, and sickness. Traditionally the superiority of Muslims’ treatment of their religious minorities has been seen in contrast to the status of Jews and Muslims in medieval Christendom. Cuffel, however, shows that much the same kind of social and cultural sharing that was previously thought peculiar to the eastern Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula also took place in northern Europe, and that cultural sharing and friendly relations in the Mediterranean coexisted with outbreaks of physical and verbal violence against Jews and other minority religions.

Cuffel’s central focus, however, is the perception of the female body, especially of the womb and menstrual blood. She argues that the “dirt, waste, and rot” (p. 26) of the female body was an integral part of the polemic between Jews,
Christians, and Muslims. The first part of *Gendering Disgust* establishes the antique, Aristotelian and Galenic, background of these views of the human body. In late antiquity, pagans, Jews, and Christians took over these views of the body and in all three traditions menstruation, foul smell, excrement, decay, and disease formed a network of associations centered on the woman's body, especially the womb. Much of the polemic against Christians focused on disagreement regarding the doctrine of the incarnation, which also many Christians, struggling between Plato's image of the body as the prison of the soul and Paul's view of the body as the temple of God, found disturbing. In Jewish, pagan, and Christian writings about the nature of God, a primary concern was to separate divinity from the biological functioning of the human body. Jewish and pagan polemics degraded Christians by emphasizing the problem of placing Jesus in a “filthy” womb. Similarly, Jesus’ need to eat, and thus to defecate, and urinate, were seen as indications that he was not divine (p. 78).

The second and main part of *Gendering Disgust* addresses the use of the trope of impurity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in twelfth and thirteenth century Europe. To a large extent the late antique disgust with the stench and filth of human existence carried over into the religious traditions of the Middle Ages. From the fourth century, however, any theology attacking the melding of man and God in Christ was seen as heretical, and ideas of the pollution of Mary's womb was henceforth shunned in Christian theological thought. Nevertheless, the twelfth century rise of Marian and Eucharistic piety based on Christ’s humanity, made the “filthy” womb of God’s Mother a popular point of attack by the opponents of Christianity (p. 108). Especially Jewish polemic emphasized the paradox of divinity contained within a filthy human body, whether in Mary’s body or in Christians’ bodies in the form of the Eucharist. Christians responded by emphasizing the purity of Mary’s virginal flesh (p. 69) and creating a theology of Mary’s body that argued that even in death her body did not decay, thus distancing her from the rest of humanity (p. 111).

Cuffel also analyzes the Christian polemics against Islam, focusing on Christians’ views of Muhammad as a false “incarnation,” a heretic. The Islamic heaven was seen as a hotbed of licentious behavior, and Muhammad himself as given to excessive sexual indulgence; all of this was deeply repulsive to Christians for whom sanctity was associated with virginity (p. 76).

The old association of sin with sickness also survived into the Middle Ages. Physical failings were often seen as tied to the female body and its fluids, especially menstrual blood. In this way Jews, Christians, and Muslims could use the female/matter versus male/spirit dichotomy to mark their opponents as spiritually flawed. For instance, Jews and Christians accused one another of being more susceptible to leprosy because they had intercourse with their menstruating wives.

In her impressive work on late antique and medieval polemic use of bodily images to create repulsion, Alexandra Cuffel draws from a wide range of sources: