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## Medieval Heresies: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 368 pages,  
GBP 19.99/US\$29.99, ISBN (paperback) 9781107607019

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# Medieval Heresies: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam

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Scholarly interest in religious dissent in monotheistic contexts and its various implications is certainly not new. 'Heresy', 'orthodoxy', 'heterodoxy' and other terms are used to describe the relations between religious establishment and periphery, the latter usually considered unacceptable, dangerous and to be persecuted. While related studies for specific religious contexts are not lacking, comparative studies of such phenomena are rare. The book by Caldwell Ames fills this gap by looking closely at medieval heresies from the late 4th to the early 16th century and in three different religions simultaneously; Christianity (both in East and West), Judaism and Islam in various geographical contexts in Europe and the Near East. This book demonstrates that these religions shared a lot in their long history and were entangled in numerous ways, not least in what they perceived as constituting heresy.

The book's chapters are both chronologically and systematically structured. In the introduction "My Community will be divided": Heresy in the Medieval World" the author explains her concept of heresy in the context of the Middle Ages, which is, by the way, a Christian periodization of history. Conflicts about doctrinal unity came about with the establishment of Christian monotheism in the late fourth century, whereas in the Greco-Roman antiquity heresy was a neutrally understood term. Although various terms are used to indicate condemnable and non-conformist positions in

the three religions (pp. 6-8), the Christian concept of heresy can be basically applied to Islam and Judaism, as well (pp. 15-25). Heresy did not necessarily signify a mistaken position, but was a matter of divergent interpretations, especially when an “unacceptable difference” was singled out (pp. 1, 26). This was grounded in authoritative sacred texts and their approved commentaries. Furthermore, the constitution of orthodoxy and heresy was not only a matter of religious actors, but also of political authorities or legal experts. Yet, occasionally minority groups devoid of power were also able to define orthodoxy and heresy.

The first chapter “Peoples of the Book (380-661)” deals with the period of Late Antiquity, from the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire by emperor Theodosius I to the assassination of the fourth caliph ‘Alī reflecting early strife within Islam over authority. It was a transition period characterized by the first attempts to normativize orthodoxy and sacred texts, bring about doctrinal unity, establish various forms of religious authority and theologically legitimize the persecution of heretics (first sustained by Augustine). This became evident in Eastern and Western Christianity (during the Trinitarian and Christological debates resolved through authoritative council decisions and state legislation), in Islam (in the Sunni and Shi’ite traditions) or in Judaism (through the Rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah). Interestingly enough, both the orthodox and the heretical sides used and appealed to the same sacred texts. These processes depended upon political and socio-cultural contexts and included violence, territorial conflicts and power struggles. This often led to blurred boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy, as was the case with Arianism which, at times, enjoyed political support against Nicene orthodoxy.

The second chapter “Triumphs of Orthodoxy (661-1031)” starts from the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate and ends with its final fall in Iberia

Here, the author examines the rise of religious dissent within early medieval Islam centered upon the problem of religious authority between the caliphs and the *'ulamā'*, the religious elite; the arrival of Karaism challenging the authority of Rabbinic Judaism and emphasizing the literal interpretation of scripture; the long period of iconoclasm in Byzantium; the appearance of Byzantine dualist heresies and the revival of heresies in the Latin West; and the mounting tensions between Eastern Orthodox and Western Latin Christians accusing each other of heresy. Despite differences, the intense preoccupation with discord, the explosion of heresiography, the deviation from the 'right path' and the disobedience towards established authorities were common in all religions, also because of their geographical coexistence and mutual influences. Intolerance towards heretics started to transform medieval societies into 'early persecuting' (pp. 135-136) ones.

The third chapter "The Perfect Hatred (1031-1209)" examines the period from the fragmentation of Iberia to the Albigensian Crusade in southern France, a papally sponsored war against heresy. It was a period of intense socio-political changes affecting the treatment of religious otherness including other socially stigmatized groups (e.g., lepers). This transformed such societies, especially the Western Latin, into 'fully persecuting' (p. 139) ones. Through constant processes of mobility heretical ideas transcended local boundaries and were transferred across the Mediterranean while the related differences escalated into wholesale conflicts (cf. the Crusades as a 'holy war' against Islam). In Western Europe the Papacy was at pains to enhance its central authority and to oppose reform movements, such as the Waldenses and the Cathars. The increased role of (Aristotelian) philosophy in theology was seen as a heretical threat, a phenomenon also encountered in Judaism and Islam. In the politically declining Byzantine East, anti-heretical discourse remained equally strong, including the final schism between the two Churches in East and West and the sack of

Constantinople in 1204 by the crusaders. Characteristically, similar anti-heretical processes are observed in various Islamic contexts (e.g., among the dynasties of the Shi'ite Fatimids and the Sunni Ayyubids). Even within Jewish communities that were marginalized and discriminated against, strong critique against dissent ideas was not at all absent (cf. the influential views of Maimonides on heresy and orthodoxy).

The fourth chapter "Cinders and Ashes (1209-1328)" surveys the period from the Albigensian Crusade to the deaths of the Christian Dominican friar Meister Eckhart and the Sunni Hanbali legal scholar Ibn Taymiyah. These mystics wrote against heresies, yet, ironically, they were also accused of professing heretical views and were brought to trial. It was a period of weighty socio-political and religious changes<sup>1</sup>, which led religious and other establishments to seek religious homogeneity, especially through the enhanced use of force, torture, punishment and the death penalty. The latter existed before as a customary response to heresy, but it now started to be formally institutionalized in the context of heresy inquisitions initiated by the Roman Catholic establishment in the West. Once more, the fervor for persecuting heretics was more manifest in Latin Christianity. This led to a significant discrimination against Jews in Western Europe (now definitely categorized as a Christian heresy), although sometimes even Jews appealed to Christians to curb their own perceived heresies (cf. the controversies over the legacy of Maimonides). All three religions also cared a lot about the growing significance of philosophy and rational inquiry in theological reflection, which again reveals common patterns of thinking about deviance.

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1 E.g., the Mongol conquest of and expansion to the East, the Christian Reconquista of the Iberian peninsula leading to forced conversions of Muslims and Jews, the enhanced enmity and estrangement between the Orthodox East and the Latin West.

The fifth chapter “Purity and Peoples (1328-1510)” discusses a period of significant changes in the Late Middle Ages caused by a collectivization of heresy and an increase of related ascriptions and value-judgements. ‘Heresy’ started to be associated with ethnic, racial, biological and genetic categories (e.g. purity of blood, use of vernacular languages as practical tools and as binding agents for the people). Religious identities were thus largely associated or even blended with ethnic and racial ones. Gender issues also played an important role as women came to be increasingly related to deviance (especially in Latin Christianity). All this was connected with tremendous developments: larger numbers of Jewish and Muslim converts to Latin Christianity in Iberia, often suspected of nongenuine conversion; theological controversies in late Byzantium and the threat of a pagan revival; the victorious expansion of the Muslim Ottomans who captured Constantinople and Byzantium in 1453 and subsequently posed a serious threat to the West, yet at the same time showed a specific form of religious tolerance, based on the Millet system, by accepting the expelled Iberian Jews into their Empire; the establishment of the Shi’ite Safavids in Iran since 1501, who were viewed by the Sunni Ottomans both as heretics and enemies; the rise of Orthodox Moscovite Russia aspiring to take up the role of Byzantium in upholding the right faith and condemning heresies (e.g., the ‘Judaizers’).

The book ends with an epilogue highlighting important differences in the examined cases and underlining commonalities and parallels, a succinct bibliography for further reading, and a useful glossary. This book has many merits. It is a concise study of a huge topic over a long temporal span from a comparative perspective, thus it had unavoidably to be selective in many respects. Nevertheless, it is an ambitious project of remarkable erudition and synthetic abilities, rich in detail and information. Caldwell Ames does not deny the differences between these religions, but also

shows their resemblances in dealing with dissent, religious and otherwise. They interacted with one another historically and geographically, their multifaceted relevance remaining evident until today. Such conflicts about doctrinal unity also reflected specific socio-political power relations between competing interest groups, as well as their diverging orientations and agendas. The construction of an authoritative orthodoxy was never static and fixed, but rather a dynamic process with fluid and penetrable borders. Tradition was often reinterpreted and re-adjusted in order to meet specific new challenges and sustain various policies. Furthermore, promoters of orthodoxy and heretical dissenters were still linked to each other in various, even indirect, ways.

The discussion of such an intriguing huge topic leads to further questions that could not be treated in this concise book. After all, theoretical approaches from the contemporary interdisciplinary religious studies are not taken into account. For example, the book's topic invites a discussion of the particularities of monotheistic religious systems and their emphasis on doctrinal purity and demarcation from 'false' ideas. Not accidentally, issues of dissent and heresy were usually castigated here quite strictly. Religiously-motivated violence has been thus connected with monotheism. Although highly disputed, there is a connection here, also when considering the different treatment of dissent in polytheism. For Caldwell Ames, "[p]olytheism, like monotheism, could generate repression" (p. 327), which is basically true. Yet, both cases are not fully analogous because of the differences in the structure, the intensity, the legitimation and the overall context of such repressive practices.

Another issue worth considering concerns religious orthodoxy, its understanding in specific contexts and the repercussions thereof. There are quite different evaluations of what might be considered 'orthodox' and different Orthodoxies might be evaluated differently by various people

with far-reaching consequences. Orthodoxy does not only signify religious conservatism, dogmatism, traditionalism and rigorism, usually as opposed to liberal and progressive views. In the history of the Byzantine world and Eastern Christianity, where the term was established as a *terminus technicus* both as a self- and an outside characterization, Orthodoxy acquired, for example, additional notions. It bestowed on the Byzantines a strong sense of superiority, supremacy and dominance, as they considered themselves the sole possessors of the only true and divinely revealed faith in the whole world. Keeping orthodoxy intact and unadulterated was regarded as the highest task in life, closely connected with the salvation of the soul and eternal life after death. Here it is about a strong literal understanding of the term 'orthodoxy', which left its imprint not only during Byzantine times, but later on in the broader Eastern Orthodox world. The development of religious exclusivism, nationalism and Messianism in modern times among various Orthodox cultures is thus not unrelated to this fundamental conviction about possessing the sole true faith. This situation was further used as a compensation mechanism to alleviate inferiority complexes and deprivation syndromes *vis-à-vis* the West and Latin Christians. Their multifaceted development and mundane success in modern times were not thought to be comparable to the insuperable value of possessing orthodoxy, simply because they were associated with Latin heretical innovations and deviations. It is thus not accidental that many Byzantines preferred Muslim rule to uniting with the heretical West and thereby running the risk of losing orthodoxy.

Talking about orthodoxy, we should finally not lose sight of the flip side of the coin, namely of orthopraxy as the correct, right and appropriate practice, in ritual contexts and otherwise. A usual question in this context relates to what counts more within a religious system, orthodoxy or orthopraxy. No doubt, in monotheism issues of doctrinal unity and



purity play a cardinal role. The constitution of orthodoxy and heresy is undoubtedly related to authoritative sacred texts, either the Torah, the New Testament or the Qur'ān. However, this should not obfuscate the fact that orthopraxy usually goes hand in hand with orthodoxy and is usually closely connected with and derived from it. Caldwell Ames does mention this issue occasionally (e.g., talking about Judaism as a religion of practice rather than belief: p. 16), yet her focus is much more on orthodoxy and everything related to it. Issues of orthopraxy would have deserved more space in such a synthetic book.

These remarks intended to draw attention to some crucial issues connected with the book's main topic. Undoubtedly, this is a very useful, erudite and needed book vividly showing the entangled history of religious dissent in these historical monotheisms. Caldwell Ames did a remarkable job in producing such a synthesis. Her book can be thus used in a variety of ways, ranging from pure academic interest and research to teaching and other educational purposes, especially in current times, in which the continuing relevance of these monotheistic religions and their perceptions of 'right' and 'wrong' (or 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy', if you like) in various constellations becomes more than evident and at times makes the headlines worldwide.

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