GENDERING DISGUST IN MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS POLEMIC

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Introduction

Problems and Theories

By its very nature, an examination of late antique and medieval polemical evocations of impurity and filth as a form of religious attack focuses on unsavory imagery. This imagery was disturbing to premodern readers; the discomfort, indeed revulsion, provoked by accusations of uncleanness was what gave the polemic that employed it its very power. Modern readers will no doubt cringe at detailed descriptions of the filthy, smelly impurity used to characterize human existence, in particular the existence of “undesirables.” This reaction was probably shared by the audience for whom the polemical texts were originally intended. In this book I seek to uncover the relationships between accusations of filthy corporeality in medieval religious polemic and the shifting paradigms of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim views of the body, especially the female body. I explore how categories of filth and ritual pollution functioned during late antiquity and the Middle Ages to define and denigrate the religious “other” and why this type of polemic was so powerful, or at least so favored by some authors and artists.

Studying ritual pollution, dirt, and the male and female bodies as part of religious polemic in medieval Islam presents difficulties because of the relative paucity of research on the subject compared to what is available for Judaism and Christianity. Studies of polemic between Muslims and other religions have tended to focus on issues of transmission, specific authors, or philosophically oriented texts. Although some scholars have dealt with the incarnation as a subject, so far much of the work has been narrowly focused on individual tractates. The crusades have inspired more research regarding images of impurity in Muslim anti-Christian polemic; however,
these observations have been embedded in larger studies of Muslims, the crusades, and propaganda and have not focused on the specific theme. By contrast, work on Western Christian polemic against Muslims abounds. The preponderance of studies on gender issues in medieval Islam has centered on the status and activities of women, images of women in literature, and sexuality. With a few important exceptions, little has been done on concepts of the body per se, or on the ways in which gender was used metaphorically. Examinations of disease, animals, or food are relatively few, and these have focused on specific ailments or problems in conceptualizing medical processes. Despite the centrality of purity in Islamic legal thought, relatively little has been written on it for the medieval period. I hope that this book and studies such as Carole Hillenbrand’s *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* will prompt further research in these areas.

The issue of pollution as a tool in Jewish anti-Christian polemic has been avoided in the past by scholars because of historiographic, modern political, and social forces. Anna Sapir Abulaafia, in her comparison of the language of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the *Toledot Yesu* stories showed that nineteenth-century scholars and translators of the Hebrew chronicles were reluctant to deal with the anti-Christian epithets they contained out of embarrassment and fear of provoking modern anti-Semitism. Since that time a handful of scholars have begun to investigate more visceral aspects of medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemic and the Christian response. A number of researchers, from Joshua Trachtenberg to Willis Johnson, have commented on the existence of Christian anti-Jewish polemic that described Jews as physically deformed or diseased. Despite increased research into aggressive, negative imagery in both Christian and Jewish writings, scholars focusing on Jewish texts encounter the same quandaries as their nineteenth-century predecessors. For example, David Berger refrained from translating the invective hari’a as “shit” for Mary in the main body of *Nizzahon ha-yashan*, a late-thirteenth-early-fourteenth-century anti-Christian polemic. In an article dealing with kabbalistic views of non-Jews, Elliot Wolfson felt obliged to disassociate himself from certain modern, in this case, Jewish, authors who used negative and even demonic imagery drawn from medieval Kabbalah to depict Islam and Christianity. The most dramatic example of how volatile the issue of even unwittingly portraying medieval Jews in a way that a modern audience finds disturbing is the reaction Israel Yuval’s article, “Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations,” elicited from Ezra Fleischer and Mordechai Breuer.
Yuval’s attempt to link Ashkenazi notions of divine vengeance and the mass suicides to the blood libel has drawn criticism from those who see his conclusions as “blaming the victims” and providing fuel for those who might attempt to justify the blood libel. Leaving aside questions about the validity of Yuval’s hypotheses, the logic behind these criticisms of his article is faulty. Often, even in the best circumstances, many medieval Christians were quiescently hostile toward Jews and Judaism. Negative Christian interpretations of Jews’ choice to kill their children and themselves naturally would have been informed by long-standing Christian traditions portraying Jews as violent, hardhearted Christ killers. In Yuval’s schema, Christians spawned the negative traditions, perpetrated the violence that drove the Jews to commit suicide and to demand divine vengeance, and themselves interpreted Jewish suicides as the acts of child murderers. Nothing in this chain of events and accusations indicates that the Jews were to blame for the blood libel. To argue that some of the Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes and violence may have been direct reactions to real or imagined Jewish anti-Christian traditions is not the same as arguing that Jews were responsible for the violence inflicted on them. Discomfort with the Jewish desire for divine vengeance against Christians and with Jewish vilification of Christians seems to stem from the fear that if Jews expressed violent feelings toward or scorn for their oppressors, then their status as victims would be compromised. Yet no matter how belligerent medieval Jewish invectives were, Jews could never be the aggressors in the same way that Christians or Muslims could because they were always in a position of political weakness.

One of the theses of my book 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. This argument accords with the findings of Ivan Marcus, who maintained that excremental and sexual polemic was integral to both medieval Ashkenazi Jewish and Christian communities and that Jews engaged in such imagery even when there was no immediate persecution or other provocation from the Christian community; such language and behavior was part of certain members’ vain efforts to prevent interfaith mingling and acculturation. He implies that much the same motivations prompted some of the Christian polemic as well.

Marcus’s work, along with that of other scholars examining northern European relations between Jews and Christians, demonstrates how closely tied medieval Jewish and Christian society in northern Europe was at a daily
This approach stands in marked contrast to earlier scholarship that portrayed Ashkenazi Jews as besieged by a hostile Christian majority and, largely by their own choice, isolated and deeply resistant to Christian influences. This shift in thinking about interfaith relations in northern Europe has its parallel in scholarship regarding Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations in the Muslim world as a whole and in Muslim- and Christian-ruled Iberia. Rather than emphasize the superiority of Muslims’ treatment of their religious minorities in contrast to the status of Jews and Muslims in northern, Latin Christendom or the “convivencia” caused by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim proximity to and interactions with one another in Iberia, scholars have been insisting on a more balanced approach that recognizes and explores the nature of violence against Jews and other minorities in these regions. Outbreaks of physical and verbal violence need to be studied alongside the clear indications of cultural sharing and amical relations among all three faiths.

Taken together, the overall picture regarding medieval Jewish-Christian (and Muslim) relations is that much the same kind of social and cultural sharing previously thought peculiar to the eastern Mediterranean, Iberia, and sometimes other parts of southern Europe also took place in northern Europe and that interfaith relations in the Mediterranean were not as rosy as they might first appear, although none would deny that there was a great deal of friendly interchange among members of all three faiths. Although this is not a central argument, my research confirms that at least in the realm of bodily polemic there was considerable similarity in language, symbolism, and method between the Mediterranean regions—both Muslim and Christian—and northern Europe. Much of the polemic under consideration here began in what became Byzantium and the Muslim Mediterranean and made its way from Iberia and southern France into northern France, Germany, and England. That Muslim, Christian, and Jewish polemic during the crusades drew from long-standing images rooted in the classical and late antique periods accounts for some of the similarities among the three in the Middle Ages. However, continued interaction not only between Jews and their Christian and Muslim neighbors but also between Muslims and Christians was a factor as well, both in Europe and in the Near East. That Christians were inspired to study Arabic and Hebrew in order to read Islamic and Jewish texts and to missionize Muslims and Jews is well documented. However, oral interchange should not be discounted as a means of information about the other, including for polemical imagery, for as I
show, clear evidence exists for such exchanges among members of all three faiths and linguistic traditions. Thus, Marcus’s observations on northern France and Germany resonate for much of the rest of medieval Europe and the Muslim Mediterranean.25

The potential effect of a religious majority’s accusations that one or more religious minorities or foreign enemies were diseased or impure was very different from that of the same accusation by a member of a minority against the majority. Whether or not medieval Christian authors specifically intended their works to spark physical violence against Jews, suggestions that Jews suffered from peculiar diseases and required a Christian child’s blood or the host to cure them, or that they defiled Christian holy objects out of spite, often resulted in Jesus’ death or injury.26 Western Christians and Muslims during the crusades used such imagery in sermons specifically to spur listeners to join in holy war against the other. In this case, metaphors of pollution were explicitly designed to provoke violent action.27 In contrast, a Jew who called Christians leprous and accused them of being worshipers of a putrid corpse endangered not only himself or herself but the entire local Jewish community as well.28 Similar dangers faced Jews and Christians who openly criticized Islam while living under Muslim rule. Some have suggested that this fear may have accounted for Jews’ relative silence regarding Muslims, yet as others have pointed out, Christians were not always so cautious.29 The level of animosity expressed may have been the same on all sides, but only the minorities were ever in danger.

What then does it mean to have two or more religious communities employing similar polemical tropes when the potential response was so different in each? What was the function of the polemic in each group, and why did the Jews in Europe indulge in such language at risk to themselves?

The human body served as a cornerstone for late antique and medieval attempts to mark the persons and practices of their religious opponents as unacceptable. Preoccupation with bodily functions in premodern religious debates makes sense in the context of Mary Douglas’s contention that beliefs and rules concerning the body’s products reflect the social structures and tensions in a given culture. All beliefs about the body form a symbolic basis for describing the society that professes them. According to Douglas, rules about consumption and excreta are particularly indicative of a community’s concerns about societal boundaries.30 In later essays Douglas maintained that accusations of disease and contagion are frequently moralized and then used as tools to control individuals or groups perceived as threatening.31
this light, references to impure corpses, blood, excreta, and disease in late antique and medieval polemic were expressions of anxiety about maintaining the hierarchy and the divisions between rival religious communities. In turn, the somatic images contained in the polemic were part of a medieval language of symbols based on the body.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust* W. I. Miller maintains that disgust is an important tool in “confirm[ing] others as belonging to a lower status and thus in [the] zero-sum game of rank necessarily defining oneself as higher.” In his brief treatment of the Middle Ages, Miller states, “Intense disgust in this period is not focused on vile substances like excrement but on people who inspire horror, fear and loathing: the leper, the Jew, the heretic, and for the monks and priest and hence much of the of fi cial discourse, women.”

My research and indeed the examples Miller provides to substantiate his remark suggest that excrement, menstrual blood, and other body fluids did elicit intense disgust during the period in question. Polemicists attacked their opponents by intimately associating them with these fluids and thus rendered them objects of profound contempt and horror. A Valentinian in late antiquity or a Muslim or Jew in the Middle Ages might repudiate the “orthodox” Christian doctrine of the incarnation on the following grounds: “You err in saying that something holy entered into a woman in that stinking place—for there is nothing in the world as disgusting as a woman’s stomach, which is full of feces and urine, which emits discharge and menstrual blood and serves as a receptacle for a man’s semen—you will surely be consumed by a “fire not blown” (Job 20:26) and descend into the deepest hell.” In such a case the author was not merely arguing that divinity and the human body are incompatible. In this and similar texts, the graphic enumeration of bodily fluids serves to provoke revulsion in the reader. This visceral emotion stands between the reader (or hearer) and any thought of accepting the idea of God’s embodiment and birth. The language in this passage also indirectly marks Christians as disgusting because they adhere to such a belief. Jewish invectives that stated that Jesus and eventually all Christians had intercourse with or were products of menstruating women, Christian tales of Jews abusing the host wafer in order to cure themselves of anal bleeding, or Christian and Muslim suggestions that the other was bestial and smelly functioned in a similar fashion. The abhorrence that these accusations were designed to evoke was more personalized, however. Rather than a hypothetical event being disgusting and therefore worthy of rejection, real people could be categorized in the same way.
Thus examining the rhetoric of disgust that developed among Pagans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims in late antiquity and the Middle Ages reveals strategies for establishing boundaries between communities. A number of methods coexisted: listing the differences in points of doctrine and decrying the stubbornness and blindness of the opposing group for not grasping the “truth”; creating laws against certain types of social interaction between members of differing faiths; and forcing members of minority religions to wear distinctive dress. Yet the first of these methods, arguing over doctrine, appeals to an intellectual, though admittedly emotionally charged, distinction between the majority and minority faiths. The latter two are legal approaches, which often seem to have been observed more in the breech than in the adherence.\footnote{35} Describing one’s opponent and his or her religion as disgusting and polluted differs in nature from these other tactics by evoking a gut-wrenching emotional antipathy that is closely linked to a variety of other feelings: fear, contempt, hatred.\footnote{36} The polemic of filth was more effective than subtle theological argumentation because it created simplified categories of good and evil by translating condemnation based on abstract theological and metaphysical reasoning into images of physically disgusting people or behavior. According to Robert Scribner in his studies of Catholic-Protestant conflict, this type of literature was popular propaganda, composed for internal consumption and designed to incite the believers who read it. Furthermore, he argued, reducing one’s enemy to filth was a form of popular attack that was easily grasped by any who read, heard, or saw it.\footnote{37}

In short, insinuating that the other was both morally and physically filthy served two functions. First, it fostered a sense of community solidarity based on hatred. Second, it set up barriers against interfaith intimacy on any level. When medieval Christians, Jews, or Muslims directed epithets of physical dirt at the very bodies of “unbelievers,” the polemic became deeply personalized, making each member of the opposing community a producer or product of vile substances and thus undesirable as an associate. Hence on a number of levels somatic polemic served the same functions in both majority and minority communities. Within the Christian, Pagan, or Muslim community, however, hatred-based solidarity and social barriers created by repugnance often served as an incitement to violence either against a religious minority—often the Jews—or against a military enemy, as in the case of later medieval Christian-Muslim polemic.

For Jews (and Christians and Muslims, when they found themselves in the position of being a religious minority), invectives, calls for vengeance,
stories that portrayed the majority group in a negative fashion, and rituals and customs designed to emphasize the separation between minority and majority communities or to ridicule the belief systems of the majority all need to be seen as part of what James Scott has dubbed the “hidden transcript,” the “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.” According to Scott, these hidden critiques of power need to be spoken in places free of surveillance and control by the dominant. In such locations anger at humiliations inflicted by those in power may be safely vented and, more important, subverted.

Rabbinic study circles, private Jewish homes, and synagogues were just such safe spaces. Expressions of rage, desire for vengeance, and mocking or crassly derogatory language referring to Christians and their rituals that appear in Hebrew literature need to be seen as part of medieval Jews’ verbal resistance to Christian oppression, serving much the same functions for medieval Jews as certain forms of rap music do for the contemporary African American youth community. Because Hebrew liturgical poems, or *piyyuṭim*, were sung in the synagogue, a place in which the entire community gathered, and could be changed at every service according to need or circumstance, they were ideal vehicles for voicing Jewish rejection of Christianity. According to Jewish tradition, *piyyuṭim* were created in response to religious persecution. That medieval Jewish texts were written in an alphabet and language that most Christians could not understand served in part to hide anti-Christian invectives and stories from official scrutiny, a venue not available to most Christians under Muslim rule. Extreme obfuscation through the use of difficult vocabulary or heavy metaphorization also aided in this process, as did the degree to which a single phrase could trigger a complex set of associations that might not be recognized by an outsider. Thus it is not surprising that calls for vengeance and invectives similar to those in the Hebrew First Crusade Chronicles and the *Toledot Yeshu* tradition are commonly found in these poems, especially those produced by the Ashkenazi communities that bore the brunt of European Christian anti-Jewish violence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and needed to resort to covert expressions of resistance to the pressures and dangers that the Christians inflicted on them. The anti-Christian invectives in the *piyyuṭim* and in other genres of Jewish literature, arguments, and stories designed to make the persons or doctrines of Pagans and Christians repugnant or silly and easily dismissed, and the rituals and customs that emphasized Jews’ separation from and rejection of the religion of their overlords were all hidden acts of rebellion.
In the early centuries of the Jewish-Christian conflict there was no need for dissembling because neither group was in the majority. Once Christianity gained political power, Jews had to be more careful about voicing their critiques of Christians. Despite the need for caution, mounting evidence indicates that Jews continued to express their rejection of Christianity’s claims via poetry and ritual, especially during Purim and Passover. Christians sometimes were aware of or suspected such activity but initially did little. The translation projects of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to new kinds of polemic and greater awareness of one another’s arguments. The decisive shift came at the Paris Talmud Trial of 1240 when a Jewish convert to Christianity, Nicolas Donin, denounced the Talmud as containing blasphemous slurs against Jesus and Mary. As William Chester Jordan has shown, such accusations were not new, but the public forum and the consequences of Donin’s charge were. Copies of the Talmud were burned or censured, and a novel form of Christian missionizing began; Christians studied the Talmud and other forms of extrabiblical Jewish literature in order either to attack and delete offensive passages or to find evidence to prove the truth of Christianity to Jews. Jews, like Muslims, were forced to listen to sermons and to endure the presence of Christian preachers in their places of worship. The “hidden transcript” was no longer a secret, and the status of the synagogues as safe havens of free expression and ritual was severely threatened. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were only the beginning of a more open but vastly more vicious and deadly exchange of invectives between Jews and Christians involving bodily fluids, animal metaphors, disease, and gender during the late Middle Ages.

While Muslims in the eastern Mediterranean and Western Christians did not need to disguise their words from one another, as European Jews did from Christians, extreme frustration, fear, and anger likewise fueled visceral polemic against the other. Muslims and Christians were frustrated by the other’s victories during the crusades and horrified at the other’s occupation of what they considered “their” holy places. Hillenbrand has argued that during the crusades Muslim writers drew on old stereotypes of northern Christians. While this is true, especially regarding Westerners’ complexion and savagery, somatic anti-Christian polemic increased during this time, and metaphors of impurity seem to have multiplied and gained an intensity not extant during the early Middle Ages. This intensity, like the linguistic virulence of Jewish anti-Christian invectives, reflects the level of crisis that the Christian invasions posed.
Christian anti-Jewish narratives were vehicles for encouraging oppression and expressions of resistance against Jews, who were increasingly viewed as physically as well as theologically threatening, and against church policies that insisted on Jews’ protected status. Jeremy Cohen has traced the long tradition that holds Jews killed Christ and has shown that during the twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries Christian thinkers allotted a greater level of responsibility, knowledge, and malice to Jews in their role in the crucifixion than in previous centuries. Building on Cohen’s observations, Robert Chazan has noted indications from the tenth to the twelfth centuries that northern European Christians saw Jews not only as challengers to the Christian faith, and as descendants of those who killed Jesus, but also as a malevolent presence ready to do harm to Christians whenever the opportunity arose. Chazan has gone on to argue that from the mid-twelfth century Christian perceptions of Jewish enmity intensified in all levels of society. Even Bernard of Clairvaux, who sought to prevent anti-Jewish violence, confirmed the widespread perception of Jewish antagonism to Christians and their faith. That Christian depictions of Jews as dirty and violent were defensive responses to belief in Jewish malice does not diminish their function as oppressive narratives. What these texts were “resisting” was the challenge, whether theological or physical, to Christian superiority and domination of the Jews based on that “superiority.” Jews saw themselves as spiritually superior to their violent Christian neighbors; however, the Christians were in fact dominant, both in sheer numbers and in political power.

However threatening European Christians saw Jews during the early Middle Ages, this impression increased during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was nurtured by accusations and imaginative stories of child murder and of the deliberate profanation of Christian holy objects. Christians likewise invented grotesque rituals by which Muslims supposedly desecrated Christian holy spaces or objects, the better to prompt their fellow Christians to war and to create a barrier of aversion against conversion to Islam. Christian tales of Jewish humiliation and divine defeat were thus often used as an attempt to reassure coreligionists that God was willing and able to thwart supposed Jewish malice. Muslims reassured their fellows in a slightly different way, by comparing Christians to despised, impure animals in contrast to the lionlike Muslims. Christian avowals that Jews merited death, even if Church law forbade executing them, may be seen as resistance to official Church policy, in word and, occasionally, in deed. By frequently evoking the dichotomy between purity and pollution, authors of all
three faiths attempted to create and defend communal hierarchies using the most visceral, easily understood imagery available. Therefore, the urgency of the rhetoric on all three sides may be attributed to the deepened sense of danger. Ironically, part of that “threat” was voluntary conversion, religious sharing, and otherwise amiable relations that sometimes created bonds of solidarity that defied the pressures of violence and calls to religious loyalty.58 If late antiquity is interesting because attitudes toward the body, gender, and religious deviance first coalesce to form a particular form of polemic shared by all groups, then the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are pivotal, because during that period the polemic on all three sides finally collides.

Organization of This Book

Part 1, “Beginnings: From Divine Incorporation to Bodily Insult in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” consists of two chapters dealing with evidence from antiquity to the early Middle Ages. Chapter 1 focuses on Pagan, Jewish, and Christian attitudes toward the physical body in relation to the world of the divine. I demonstrate that all three groups had similar views of the body and that menstruation, foul smell, excrement, and skin disease formed a network of somatic associations centered on the woman’s body. These, along with metaphors based on impure or undesirable foods, were a shared language of symbols on which much of the religious polemic of the period drew.

Chapter 2 explores how this network of beliefs about the physical world in relation to the divine functioned in early polemic. I begin by showing that Jews evoked excrement and ritual impurity of various kinds to mark non-Jews and “deviant” Jews, as well as Christians, as repugnant. Late antique Pagans, Christians, and Manicheans did not have such a well-developed system of categorizing impurity, so they used graphic descriptions of human organs and bodily functions to denigrate one another. Much of the argumentation centered on disagreements regarding the doctrine of the incarnation, which Pagans, Manicheans, and many Christians found deeply disturbing. By the fifth century onward in Eastern Christian polemic regarding the incarnation, the language became less graphic; however, early medieval Christians in the West continued to concern themselves with the problem of placing God-as-Jesus in a “filthy” womb. The eighth and ninth centuries marked an important shift as Eastern Christians focused their virulence against the new “heresy,” Islam, and its founder, Muhammad. Muslims likewise translated and adopted
earlier polemical imagery regarding the incarnation in their writings against Christianity, which entered into Jewish polemic with the composition of the *Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-ʿUsquf*, a Judeo-Arabic anti-Christian tract. The Jewish compiler of this text combined earlier impurity-based arguments with graphic descriptions of the stench and filth of human existence that had been common to late antique Pagan, Manichaean, and Christian polemic. This new approach, along with midrashic, talmudic, and poetic texts using metaphors of impurity to attack Christianity, became part of the medieval Jewish repertoire in the twelfth century when the *Qiṣṣat* was translated from Arabic into Hebrew.

Part 2, “The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Intensification and Collision of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Polemic,” focuses on the use of impurity in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim invective from twelfth-, thirteenth-, and early-fourteenth-century Europe. Chapter 3 provides background in the shifting attitudes toward women, the human body, and disease; the rise of Marian and eucharistic piety among Christians; the new developments in Christian and Jewish Scholasticism, in terms of both methodology and the impact of the many translating projects; and the changing nature of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations during these centuries. All these factors coalesced to pave the way for a visceral polemic that relied on graphic accusations of impurity, filth, and disease to denigrate religious opponents.

In chapter 4 I maintain that despite the increased emphasis on and piety surrounding Christ’s humanity, attitudes toward the human body during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries made the mixture of divinity and human corporeality an uncomfortable one for many people. Jews, who shared many of the views of the body with Christians and yet had no obligation to accept the doctrine of the incarnation, played on the paradox of pure divinity contained within a filthy human body, whether in Mary’s body in the form of a fetus or in Christians’ bodies in the form of the Eucharist. Like those of their late antique Pagan, Manichaean, and Christian predecessors, Jewish critiques of the incarnation centered on the dirt of Mary’s body rather than Jesus’. Incarnation arguments in Jewish anti-Christian polemic during this period drew from or elaborated on ideas expressed in the *Qiṣṣat*; however, the *Qiṣṣat* would not have been translated and used so widely in the twelfth century had not the arguments been particularly relevant. Christians, for their part, became aware of Jewish argumentation against the incarnation and repeated the graphic descriptions of Mary’s and Jesus’ uncleanness only to turn them into a demonstration of Jews’ carnality and filth.
Muslims did not develop new or more graphic argumentation against Jesus’ incarnation in the womb. Rather they focused on the Holy Sepulcher as a vile place because it represented Christian belief in Jesus’ death, a doctrine they rejected and could safely criticize in the strongest language possible without denigrating Jesus or Mary, whom they respected as prophets. Christians, drawing from earlier traditions, set up Muhammad as a false “incarnation” or “god,” disgusting in life and, most of all, in the manner of his death. Both Muslims and Christians focused on the other as polluting violators of sacred space whose entry into the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem, was akin to rape, each viewing the other as “men gone wrong.” Both Muslims and Jews repeated abbreviated invectives such as ‘ahl al-rijs (the people of filth) or ben niddah (son of a menstruating woman) in chronicles, polemic, and poetry; for Muslims, they expressed profound scorn for Christians, and, in the case of Jews they were a language of resistance. These terms were derogatory in their own right and overturned Christian claims to purity and sexual continence. They, like accusations of disease or comparisons with impure animals, emphasized the filth and pollution of Christians and the Christian faith. However, in the case of Jewish invectives, they also reminded their Jewish audience of more elaborate midrashic traditions or oral traditions from the Toledot Yesu that provided the highly negative contexts for them. Piyyuṭim, perhaps more than any other genre of Jewish literature functioned as the prime venue for epithets of anger at Christian abuse. The synagogues in which these poems were sung served as safe havens in which Jews could voice their absolute repudiation of Christianity. However, increased Christian awareness and surveillance of Jewish polemic and behavior coupled with an upsurge of persecutions caused Jewish resentment to rise and at the same time severely curtailed safe avenues for its expression.

Chapter 5 begins with an overview of the long-standing association of sin with sickness and the impact of the “medical revolution” of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I then turn to Christian accusations that Jews suffered from certain diseases as a result of either punishment by God or diet. Christians also contended that Jews had peculiar physical characteristics such as swarthy skin or red hair, all of which were negatively valued. Christians portrayed Muslims as dark depending on the relative “evil” of the given persons or their refusal or willingness to consider conversion. Muslims likewise alluded to northerners’ (Christians’) inherent stupidity and lust for blood to make them repugnant in their coreligionists’ eyes. Jews rebutted Christian slurs by maintaining that Christians were more susceptible to leprosy or were
“pale and fair” because they had intercourse with their menstruating wives. In their choice of diseases and physical traits, Muslims, Christians, and Jews played on a network of medical theories and theological associations to mark their opponents grossly carnal, gluttonous, and lustful. Often these physical failings were closely tied to the female body and its products, especially menstrual blood, enabling Jews and Christians to use the female/matter versus male/spirit dichotomy, which had been in existence since antiquity, to label their opponents as spiritually flawed.

Chapter 6 explores how Jews, Christians, and Muslims used iconographic, fable, bestiary, and other animal traditions to represent one another as (1) too stupid and irrational to qualify as proper men; (2) impure and savage, making them bestial rather than “manly”; and (3) feminized and dirty. Muslims, Christians, and especially Jews used animal imagery as a way to subvert one another’s claim to righteousness and power. Specific beasts were associated with particular traditions and characteristics, making them ideal vehicles for visual polemic in the Jewish and Christian contexts. An animal depicted in an illuminated manuscript or on a cathedral could be interpreted in different ways depending on the audience (this is especially important when considering the debate about who created the illuminations on Jewish manuscripts) and convey a wide range of polemical meanings in a succinct form. Furthermore, the “enemy” would not necessarily recognize and understand the polemic behind an artistic depiction of an animal or that the image was polemical.59 Such subterfuge was more important for the Jewish than for the Christian or Muslim communities since the latter had no need to hide their rhetoric. Unlike written forms, sculptures and illuminations of animals required familiarity with the interpretive traditions surrounding them but did not require the ability to read and thus could reach a wider audience than more complex and learned written polemical genres. While even in manuscripts Muslims do not seem to have engaged in visual polemic using animals, Muslim anti-Christian animal similes were common in oral epics, and thus, like the cathedral sculptures in the Western Christian world, would have reached a wide audience.

If the beginning of our story lies in late antiquity it certainly does not end in the thirteenth or even fourteenth century.60 Early modern polemic against Jews or between Catholics and Protestants also used crassly corporeal images of menstruating, eating, excreting, and vomiting to render their religious opponents abhorrent and their theology unworthy.61 However, somatic polemic involving pollution and dirt seems to have become an integral part of
Europeans’ religious language during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries; thus I have elected to focus on these middle years. I have chosen the mid-fourteenth century as the terminus ad quem for this book. The onslaught of the plague beginning in 1345, its horrendous effects on the body, and the concomitant accusations against Jews in Europe open new issues regarding the body and disease both in the Near East and in Europe. While studying the impact of changing views and roles of the body, disease, and gender in polemic between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the late medieval and early modern period would undoubtedly be fruitful, I leave this task to others.

Methodology

I wish to show that Jews, Christians, and Muslims drew from a common set of symbols in their disputes with one another but gave the symbols different valences. For a Jew to call a Christian a pig, for example, did not have an identical meaning to the Jew as it did to the Christian, who also likened Jews to swine, but the understandings each community assigned to this and other epithets were based on medical and biological theories and cultural realities that either transcended religious boundaries or were at least known to both sides. I hope that future scholars studying specific instances of interfaith conflict will be increasingly inclined to examine how each side manipulated polemical tropes to its own needs. Showing the profound extent to which Muslim, Christian, and Jewish discourses about the other were intertwined is the first step in this process.

Which is not to say that scholars have made no effort in this direction. David Nirenberg notes the relationship between Jewish anti-Christian Purim rituals and the ritual violence that marked Christian Easter week celebrations. He further noted the participation of Muslims in ritualized Christian anti-Jewish violence. The recent collection of articles on Passover and Easter published at Notre Dame continues in the same comparative vein. Both Ivan Marcus’s *Rituals of Childhood* and Daniel Boyarin’s study of Christian and Jewish concepts of martyrdom examine specific areas of common cultural understandings in Jewish and Christian communities. Israel Yuval’s work focuses on the interplay between Jewish and Christian polemic. The intersection of Muslim and Jewish and, to a lesser extent, Christian polemic regarding interfaith relations and gender has also attracted the attention of some scholars. Most studies of interfaith disputes examine the polemical
and political positions of both or all three sides, even if the scholar in question is interested in the writings of one group more than the other. However, this approach is different from arguing that the underlying symbols used in the rhetoric of both groups are the same, or at least very closely linked, which is what I attempt to show in this book.

Methodologically, the most problematic chapters to write were the first two. Boyarin in his *Carnal Israel* outlines the difficulties of attempting to write a history of late antique Jewish attitudes toward the body. Unlike Christian and even Pagan texts from the same period, the dating of Jewish sources is often uncertain. Rabbinic sources are chronologically complicated texts as the sayings in a particular text are often attributed to rabbis long dead by the time the Talmud or a particular midrash was compiled. This problem has led some scholars to attempt to “re-create” earlier attitudes based on the genealogies of the rabbis to which a particular set of sayings is attributed, while other scholars have insisted that a particular rabbinic text reflects only the period in which it was written down. Boyarin adopts a middle ground, namely that these texts may contain earlier material but are also products of the period in which they were composed so that it is nearly impossible to pinpoint precisely in which chronological layer a particular text belongs. The obstacles indicated by Boyarin are compounded when trying to compare Jewish views to those of Pagans and Christians. One is faced with attempting to fit chronologically amorphous Jewish texts within a comparatively precise time line of the development of Pagan and Christian attitudes toward the body. The same kinds of problems are present when attempting to compare polemical texts from Pagan, Jewish, Christian, Manichaean, and even Muslim communities, though with the arrival of Islam, Jewish texts begin to be slightly less difficult to date. In chapter 1 I examine texts from roughly the first century B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E. However, some of the philosophical and medical texts may be earlier, and some of the midrashic texts may have been written later. This choice may be frustrating for scholars who expect a precise chain of development and change in texts within a particular tradition or across several religious and cultural traditions. Yet without a broad view such as the one I have taken in chapter 1, a comparison of Jewish discussions of corporeality in relation to the divine to those of other religious traditions in antiquity would be extremely difficult. Shifts most certainly occurred, and I have tried to take them into account when possible, yet the focus of this book is not to provide a history of attitudes toward the human body, food, smell,
and the divinity but rather to examine how these views functioned in religious polemic. Chapter 2 does this for late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The analysis of gendered, somatic polemic in multiple cultural-religious traditions has required reading sources in many languages. Some of my argumentation is based on examinations of the vocabulary that late antique and medieval authors chose in their metaphors for and insults directed toward the religious other or in their depictions of the body in general. Where my analysis focuses on such linguistic questions, or there is some debate as to how a passage should be translated, or the text is difficult to obtain or translate, I have provided the passages in their original language in the notes. For the sake of economy I have not provided the original language when the texts are readily available and their linguistic complexities have no direct bearing on the book.

Throughout this book I attempt to balance my discussions of religious traditions. If at times one group is allotted more attention than another, I do not wish to imply that one is more important, interesting, or blameworthy than another; rather the issue being discussed is more relevant to one group than to another. Although my portrayal of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations is disturbing, that Muslims, Christians, and Jews, in the midst of opposing one another in the most visceral, bitter language possible, held similar assumptions about the body, sinfulness, and religious purity points to a high degree of sharing among them. Thus this book suggests that late antique and medieval Jews and Christians were not separate communities that interacted only grudgingly but rather that they were members of two faiths in a single culture, holding common values and assumptions. One finds greater differences between Muslims of the eastern Mediterranean and European Christians and Jews. Nevertheless, the commonality of metaphors, fears, and values present in the polemic from both sides of the Mediterranean adds to the growing scholarship suggesting that the Near East and Europe were inextricably intertwined.70