

Crossing Religious Boundaries in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean

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Scholars have turned with increasing interest in recent years to the history of the Mediterranean. The subject is not new, but the ways in which we approach it have changed. No longer viewed primarily from the vantage points of either economic or imperial histories, the Mediterranean has emerged as a site of immense cultural complexity. As a result, the rather sharply defined contours of religions and cultures that seemed to shape the identities of those who lived around its shores now appear far more fluid, much less fixed than they did to an earlier generation of scholars. Yet there were precursors to this shift in perspective. As long ago as the late 1940s, for example, Fernand Braudel called attention to the complexity of this environment in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*. In numerous splendid passages, perhaps most notably in his romanticized but suggestive description of the folklore and religious beliefs of highlanders in the opening pages of his study, Braudel cautioned against thinking of their worlds in purely Christian or purely Muslim terms.¹ To the contrary, making sense of religious belief, Braudel maintained, requires attention to the whole social environment, and historians need to recognize not only the relative ease with which men and women of the Mediterranean could pass from one faith to another, but also the tenacity of ancient peasant beliefs, even as Christian and Muslim authorities sought to impose new ways of thinking.

Braudel problematized the question of religious identities for largely stable populations. The studies in this issue of *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, by contrast, focus primarily, though not exclusively, on highly mobile populations: on travelers, run-aways, merchants, missionaries, and warriors. While the case studies I have gathered here are diverse, their authors have—in their attempts to illuminate the making and unmaking of religious boundaries in the Mediterranean—drawn, either directly or indirectly, on new questions about the past enabled by recent work in

cultural history, postcolonial studies, and social anthropology. Above all, I hope that this volume will spark discussion among scholars interested in the Mediterranean World in the era before the Atlantic World—and the energies it unleashed—surpassed it as a “world economy.”

Franciscans and crusaders are, of course, well known as border-crossers; and both played a key role in strengthening papal and western European power in the central Middle Ages. The relation of these celebrated representatives of western Christendom, however, had a far more complex relation to the Muslim world than we might have at first expected. In his essay on the *Gesta Francorum*, a major chronicle of the First Crusade, Joshua Birk offers a new reading of the text and demonstrates that its author, who was present at the siege of Antioch, did not envision the conflict before him purely in terms of Christian and Muslim antagonisms. To the contrary, the author (whose name we do not know) drew on his experiences in southern Italy, where alliances between the Norman Christians and Islamic forces had been frequently forged over the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries. As Birk suggests, there was considerable cooperation between these two faiths when common interests demanded it. In a similar fashion, Brett Whalen brings to light a rather unexpected aspect of papal diplomacy in the thirteenth century, in Rome’s seeking points of cooperation with the Almo-had rulers of North Africa. Above all, the papacy sought to reach accommodations with Muslim rulers in order to better protect the Christians who were living abroad. Clearly the lines between Latin Christendom and the Islamic world were not as fixed as is often believed.

Such patterns of interaction continued throughout the late Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Spain, as is well known, witnessed a drive for religious purity in the late medieval and early modern periods, most notably with the defeat of the Muslim emirate of Granada in 1492 and with the expulsion of the Jews from Aragon and Castile in that same year. Yet these repressive acts too often mask the cultural and religious diversity of late medieval and early modern Spain. As the contributions by Shayne Aaron Legassie and Amy Remensnyder demonstrate, many pockets of Spanish culture in this era were remarkably porous and experimental, especially in the encounters between Islam and Christianity. In his study of the *Andanças e viajes por diversas partes del mundo*, the fifteenth-century travel narrative of Pero Tafur, Legassie highlights several textual fluctuations that simultaneously reinforce and subvert barriers not only between Christians and Muslims but also between Latin and Greek Orthodox Christians at the end of the Middle Ages. In a similar vein, Amy Remensnyder shows how

in an early modern Spain torn by strong divisions between Christians and Moriscos—many of whom were still suspected of being secret Muslims—the Virgen del Sacromonte, traditionally a Christian symbol, was transformed by Moriscos, most of them living in North Africa, into their patron saint, thereby blurring in significant ways the traditional boundaries between Christianity and Islam. Thus, not only literature but also more popular religious practices, offered individuals and communities in early modern Spain ways of crossing boundaries that would have otherwise separated them from one another.

The final two essays explore aspects of religious identity in early modern Venice, with attention to some of the ways in which Protestants, Jews, and Muslims negotiated this early modern city. My own article contrasts the strategies of hybridity developed by the Marranos or Portuguese New Christians with the strategies of dissimulation developed by the Nicodemites in this port city in the late sixteenth century. Natalie Rothman's essay, by contrast, focuses on the fascinating story of a young girl who had converted from Islam to Christianity in the early seventeenth century. As Rothman's essay illustrates, the girl's story quickly reached the highest echelons of both Ottoman and Venetian society and might easily have fueled conflict between these two states had it not been for the ways in which both Bosnian and Venetian elites managed to find certain converging interests and certain common vocabularies to make sense of this complex event from two different perspectives. Together these last two essays underscore how difficult it is to understand Venice without a grasp of its connections to the life of the Mediterranean and to events that reached from Lisbon to Istanbul.

The essays here necessarily can only point in a partial sense to the variety of ways in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims sought points of accommodation or cooperation in a world too often subject to religious conflict. Unquestionably, the frequent clashes—from the Crusades to the Christian assault on the Jews and Muslims of Spain, to the battles between the Christian and Muslim fleets at Lepanto and beyond—attest to the fact that religious divisions, especially when political forces came into play, did much to define the relations among these three major religious traditions. But, as historians of trade and commerce have long argued, this was also a world of considerable interaction, often of a very friendly nature, among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim merchants. What the essays in this volume add is a more nuanced picture of other (noncommercial) forms of interaction among the three faiths, at both the elite and popular levels.²

Yet finding a vocabulary to make sense of subjectivities or identities

in a world marked by extreme mobility remains an important challenge to scholars. Of course, not everyone was mobile. But merchants, missionaries, diplomats, and soldiers led lives marked by movement, and they often crossed from one religious sphere into another. To survive they appealed to common beliefs or they masked differences through the forging of hybrid or ambiguous identities. But whatever their strategies, their relationship to religious beliefs and practices cannot be understood within the framework of the understanding of one faith or one religious tradition. How scholars will locate commonalities in such a complex and mobile world is not clear. Indeed, historians have only recently begun to make sense of the ways in which men and women in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period developed strategies that enabled them to cross borders in an often dangerous world. Then, as now, the Mediterranean was the site not only of conflict but also of unexpected alliances and convergences. What is clear is that the question of how we understand the lives of individuals in a highly mobile environment has the possibility of broadening our sense of how diverse the religious experiences were of men, women, and children in the medieval and early modern periods.



Notes

- 1 Fernand Braudel, "Mountains, Civilizations, and Religions," in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 34–38. The first French edition of Braudel's masterpiece appeared in 1949. My appreciation to Rochelle Rojas for sharing with me her study, so far unpublished, of Braudel's approach to the cultural history of the mountains of the Mediterranean.
- 2 Compare, for example, Adnan A. Husain and K. E. Fleming, *A Faithful Sea: The Religious Cultures of the Mediterranean, 1200–1700* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).