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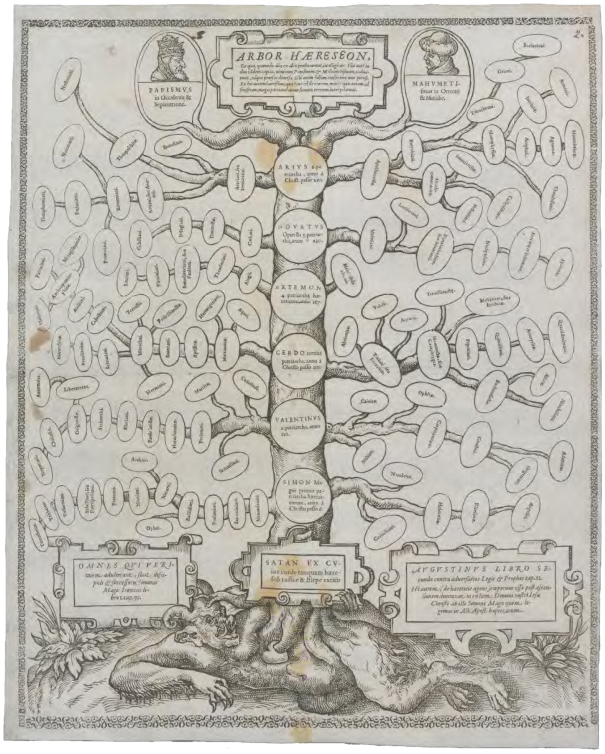
The Abrahamic Heresies: Taxonomies of Faith



Arbor Hæreseon ("The Tree of Heresies"), 1576 Forschungsbibliothek Gotha der Universität Erfurt, Chart. B 24 (Available online here) (CC-BY-SA 4.0)

Why do we generally talk of *three* Abrahamic faiths, rather than hundreds of Abrahamic groups who share a greater or lesser number of traditions and beliefs in common? Ideas like "the Abrahamic religions" and "the great monotheisms" have long been criticized for being anachronistic or inaccurate. But few seem troubled by the assumption that this broad tradition – whatever we call it – has a natural tripartite structure: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However obvious it may feel today, this "tripartitism" was not always self-evident and is the product of medieval taxonomical systems which have a long and complex history. The notion of an Abrahamic trilogy of course postdates the time of Mohammed – but even after the 7th century, tripartite analyses competed with other forms of categorization which emphasized different cultural, theological, linguistic, ethnic, and ritual features. This project sets out to examine how competing "Abrahamic" groups set about classifying one another, focusing in particular on the metaphors, concepts, and taxonomical hierarchies which they used.

In early Christian thought, where "heresiology" first emerged as a major genre, the heretic represents the internal enemy par excellence: someone who emerges from within the community of the faithful and attempts to destroy ecclesiastical unity and pervert Christian orthodoxy. But heresy was a highly productive idea and Christians used it creatively to frame their relationship to non-Christian peoples. In the early Middle Ages, Christians generally classified Jews and Muslims as some species of heretic

– that is, as groups who had their roots in Christianity but who had turned away from it at some point in the past and now promulgated a perverted version of Christian orthodoxy. It is here, in ancient and early medieval Christian heresiology, that my project begins.

Predictably, my research falls into three parts. The first explores the taxonomies of Judaism composed by early medieval Christians from Northumbria to Damascus. It focuses on theological ethnographies which split Judaism into a plurality of "heresies", especially on those which went beyond the groups familiar from the New Testament – Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes – and included more exotic sects: Essenes, Hemerobaptists, Herodians, Genistae, Troglodytes, Frog Worshippers, and so on. Although Christians often talked of Judaism as if it were a stable and cohesive entity, many gave it a binary or tri-partite structure. Others – especially heresiologists – dissected it even more finely, identifying four, six, seven, eight, or ten types of Jew. In this part of the project I ask when, where, and why Christian scholars divided Judaism into multiple identities and how they linked them genetically with various forms of Christianity.

Part two compares what medieval Christians said about the structure of Judaism with what contemporary Jewish writers said about it. Although Christian heresiologists generally purported to be describing contemporary Judaism, most of their material was recycled from the existing heresiological tradition. The result was a substantial disjunct between Christian and rabbinic taxonomies of Judaism – Christian accounts, written in Greek and Latin, gave centre-stage to groups which were either completely unknown in Hebrew-language sources, or played only a minor role in the rabbinic historical consciousness. Despite these differences, Jewish and Christian taxonomies of Judaism were, in many periods, in close contact. Early Christian heresiologists based their writings on the statements of Jews like Philo, Paul, and Josephus. And Christian heresiology, in its turn, influenced how diaspora Jews came to understand their own identity and relationship to other groups. In some cases, Jewish writers and communities readopted "Jewish" identities which had, for centuries, survived only as the bogeymen of the Christian imagination. In others, they projected archaic and sinister Jewish identities onto other groups of contemporary Jews. In this part of the project, I will pay particular attention to writings produced in the Iberian Peninsula, including the Islamic heresiologists of al-Andalus. I hope, thereby, to build up a picture of the rival accounts of Judaism which emerged from conversations between early medieval Iberian Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Although this part of the project takes Judaism as its focus, it will pay attention more broadly to the way in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims taxonomized one another, and explore the genetic relationships between their "heretical" imaginaries.

Part three steps back to survey the hall of mirrors in which groups from the Abrahamic tradition sat and observed one another, by examining the concepts and taxonomical systems with which they went to work: metaphors like the **tree** (with its roots, boughs, branches, and fruits), **family genealogy** (with patriarchs, mothers, wayward offspring, and siblings), **animals** (with stings, poison, and startling reproductive methods), **agriculture** (vineyards ravaged by foxes or weeds) and **disease** (with infections and cures). It also looks at the semantics and development of the linguistic concepts used in these classificatory systems, like Greek *hairesis*, Hebrew *minim*, Latin *heresis* and *secta*, and Arabic *firqa* and *milla*. Through particular attention to the use of visual language and illustration, I also hope to trace developments in how heresiologists and their readers visualized their subject over the centuries. (For a fine example from the time of the Reformation consider the *Tree of Heresy*, above, which adorns a Protestant edition of Augustine's *Book on*

Heresies,printed in Geneva in 1576: ‘Papism’ and ‘Muhammetism’ sit at the top, facing one another, as the most recent outgrowths of a tree with its roots in the Devil.) Part three aims to sketch the similarities and the differences between the structure of the heresiological systems produced by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and to explore historical contact between them over the early medieval period. Are the similarities sufficient to justify talk of three (or more!) variants on a shared “heresiological model” which was co-produced by the Abrahamic traditions as a whole? And, if we take these self-understandings seriously, how helpful is it for modern scholars to think of the “monotheistic” traditions of the medieval world as consisting of *three* religions – given that manyChristian, Jewish, and Muslim groups have historically viewed their own group as a slender pillar of orthodoxy, standing alone above a turbulent sea of Abrahamic heresies?