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SNSF CORE / ERC EuQu Conference

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The “Excluded Third” in the Co-Production of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Organized by Mercedes García-Arenal, Katharina Heyden, David Nirenberg, and Davide Scotto

CALL FOR PAPERS

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often understood as an ensemble of three (‘Abrahamic,’ ‘monotheistic,’ scriptural, or prophetic) religious communities and traditions. But often when adherents of two of these “sibling” religions interact, the third is treated as a figure to be marginalized, stigmatized, or instrumentally exploited vis-à-vis the others. Our conference proposes to explore this dynamic of the excluded third.

As an example of this dynamic, consider the 1501 mission of the humanist Peter Martyr of Anghiera, sent by Spain’s Catholic Monarchs to the Mamluk sultan Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī in Cairo. His goal was to reassure the Sultan about the treatment of the Muslims who had recently been converted to the Christian faith in Spain, offer the Mamluks military support against the Ottomans in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in return obtain protection for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. During his mission Martyr visited the garden of Al-Maṭariyya, renowned for its miraculous balsam, and believed to be a sacred site visited by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus during their flight to Egypt to escape Herod the Great’s slaughter of the innocents (cf. Matt. 2:1-19).

Martyr found the balm plant desiccated and dying, a condition he attributed to deliberate malice and desecration. For centuries, he explained, kings and sultans had forbidden Jews from approaching the holy fountain in the middle of the garden. The site was venerated by both Christians and Muslims, Martyr stressed, because the Virgin Mary had washed Jesus’ clothes in it during the flight to Egypt, thereby endowing the fountain the power to water the miraculous balm. But the sultan’s “imprudent administrators” had recently allowed a Jew who professed to be a Muslim and his Jewish wife to enter the balm garden with their little son. The woman washed dirty laundry in the fountain, desecrating it. Hence the balm-producing shrubs had shriveled from the roots. The miraculous balm, long preserved by an alliance between Christians and Muslims based on shared veneration of the Virgin, had been destroyed by the impurity of the common Jewish adversary, represented in an “infidel” Jew-child embodying the negative double of the infant Jesus.



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Peter Martyr's example is but one of many that unveil the “excluded third”, a figure of thought that often emerges in the ambivalent co-productive dynamics between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam across centuries. In the attempt of arrangement, rapprochement, or mutual understanding between two of them it is an often-used strategy to signal the third that the two agree is worse than the two antagonists and even to blame the third for complicating the dialogue between the two others. Martyr aimed to cozy up with the sultan and ally with the Mamluks while, at the same time, he wrote about the Muslims of Granada as “the bad sprouts” of Europe, themselves corrupted by the Jews.

This early modern episode concerns the polemical recourse to Judaism by a Christian actor who aims to establish a non-conflictual relation with a Muslim. But this is just one of many different variants of a two-vs-one scheme that, in the course of the rich history of interactions of the three religions from the early Middle Ages to the present, “excludes” time and again Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. When, for example, Muslim and Jewish scholars living in Fatimid and later Mamluk Egypt wrote polemically against the Trinity, both charged Christians with idolatry, identifying Christianity as a common theological enemy of the “Law.” The late twentieth-century concept of the “Judeo-Christian roots of Europe,” in turn, provides a politically relevant example of a third variant of this dynamic, one that often implies a strong anti-Islamic stance.

The aims of this conference are to describe variants of this dynamic of the excluded third, as well as to understand its causes, consequences, and cultural and theological products. We will embrace a long *durée* perspective, which may allow us to perceive whether variants of this dynamic prevail in given periods or contexts, and with what impact these might have on the co-production of the three religions.

We are inviting papers exploring the problem of the “excluded third” at any time or place in the interactive history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, from their origin in Late Antiquity to today.

Travel expenses, accommodation costs, and meals at the Villa Vigoni from 10 to 13 June 2025 will be covered by the projects.

The submission deadline for proposals is **June 1, 2024**.

Please send your draft proposals (one page max.) and CV, both in English, to Katharina Heyden (katharina.heyden@unibe.ch) and Davide Scotto (davide.scotto@unipv.it).