

‘Judaism’, ‘Islam’, and the Dangers of Knowledge in Christian Culture

**with special attention to the case of King Alfonso X,
‘the Wise’, of Castile**

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Beginning already with its scriptures, Christianity developed figures with which to think about and represent errors of apprehension, interpretation, and reasoning about the world. ‘While the Jews demand signs and the Greeks look for wisdom, we are preaching a crucified Christ,’ writes Paul (I Cor. 1.22-28). Gentility and Judaism represent here two forms of incorrect engagement with the world and its creator, forms held up in heuristic opposition to the follower of Christ. This essay first outlines this figural epistemology, and then traces the development of these figures—Jews, Muslims, and giants, among others—across medieval and early modern critiques of natural philosophy. It suggests that, precisely because the power of these religious and ethnic figures of thought is so strong, that power needs to be considered whenever we are trying to account for the role of real Muslims and Jews (not to mention giants) in the study and transmission of scientific knowledge in the Middle Ages. The essay concludes with a case study, that of Alfonso X ‘The Wise’ of Castile and his scientific projects, in order to demonstrate how difficult it can be for us to separate the figural from the real in our histories of science.

Perhaps if I had not read Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* in the same summer week that I came across Diego Rodríguez de Almela’s chronicle in the library of the Escorial, I would not have noticed a similarity between them. Diego’s fifteenth-century history of Spain explains that King Alfonso the Wise of Castile (1221-1284) lost his kingdom because he boasted that if he had been present with God at the creation, the world would have been better arranged.¹ The sixteenth poem

¹ See Diego Rodríguez de Almela, *Compendio Historial*, Escorial V II-10-11. According to Diego Rodríguez de Almela, Alfonso X, ‘estando en sevilla dixo en plaça publica que si el fuera con dios quando fazia el mundo que muchas cosas enmendara enque se fizieran mejor que lo que se fizio.’ (f. 128v). For a similar critique of King Peter ‘the Cruel’ along these lines see

of Baudelaire's collection (published in 1857), 'Le châtime[n]t de l'orgueil,' tells of an immensely learned doctor in some unspecified pious past – 'En ces temps merveilleux où la Théologie/ Fleurit avec le plus de sève et d'énergie ...' – who one day boasted that it was he who made Jesus important, and not vice versa. At the very moment of his boast, he was plunged as punishment into intellectual nullitude.² My experience may have been coincidence, but the similarity itself is not merely an accidental product of my attention. It is also, I want to suggest, a systematic symptom of a historically powerful strand of Christian anti-intellectualism, a strand with important implications for how we should approach the history of ideas.

Jokes about the pride and pretensions of philosophers appear almost as early as philosophy itself (think of Aristophanes' ridicule of his contemporary Socrates in 'The Clouds,' ca. 423 BCE), and clutter the pages of Late Antique humor collections like the Philogelos. Ancient Judaism, too, aimed strong criticism at those who placed more trust in human strengths, whether physical or mental, than in God's power. But I will focus on the distinctive Christian form of this critique, a form already visible in one of the earliest surviving writings from a follower of Jesus, Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians: 'the wisdom of the world is folly to God. Any one of you who thinks he is wise by worldly standards must learn to be a fool in order to be really wise.' Christ is come 'to destroy the wisdom of the wise,' writes the Apostle, and to 'save believers through the folly of the gospel.'

One of the many notable things about this passage is that Paul not only targets specific kinds of wisdom as dangerously false, but also describes these wisdoms in terms of specific 'ethnicities' (the word is Paul's): 'While the Jews demand signs (σημεῖα) and the Greeks look for wisdom (σοφίαν), we are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness....' (I Cor. 1.22-28) There are important differences here between Jew and Greek, but there are also important similarities. To summarize roughly the similarities: both Jew and Greek glory in the work of human hands and human reason, revel in the wisdom of this world, and prefer the carnal truths such wisdom can offer to the spiritual ones available through Christ's teachings. Indeed, their yearning for

E. Mitre Fernandez, 'La historiografía bajomedieval ante la revolución trastámara: Propaganda política y moralismo', in *Estudios de historia medieval: homenaje a Luis Suarez*, Valladolid: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valladolid, 1991, pp. 332-47.

² Samuel Johnson, in his *Rasselas* of 1759, attributed a similar malady to a (presumably Muslim) astronomer, whose ability to predict the weather leads him slowly into the mad belief that he is the cause, rather than the observer, of all meteorological phenomena. 'Of the uncertainties of our present state,' concludes Johnson's sage Imlac, 'the most dreadful and alarming is the uncertain continuance of reason', (S. Johnson, *Rasselas*, Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1856 [first edition], p. 78).

such 'wisdom' itself actively impedes their openness to God's salvific 'folly.' Already here, at the very beginnings of what would come to be called Christianity, the false allures of intellectual power are made to wear Jewish and Gentile faces.³

In the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche proclaimed that 'All great things must first wear terrifying and monstrous masks in order to inscribe themselves on the hearts of humanity'. Even without embracing the dictum, we should want to ask how the stigmatized ethnic figures (a more theological word than 'masks') of 'Jew' and 'Gentile' that Paul and other early followers of Jesus assigned to the powers of human reason affected the future of those powers. I will claim (and attempt to demonstrate) that the early Christian classification of certain types of human thought as 'Jewish' and 'Gentile' had a profound effect upon how future Christians would think about thought; and that (to formulate a narrower version of our question) we need to be aware of these classifications and their enduring effects if we wish to understand the history of Christian thought about the powers of reason.⁴

By pointing to the precocious deployment of figures of 'Jewishness' and 'Gentility' in Christian epistemology, I do not mean to imply that the meaning or content of the figure remains constant, or that the work that it can do within a given culture is always the same. Quite to the contrary, the meaning, content, potential power, and even the very shape of the figure are always changing, depending on the contexts in which it is deployed. We see this process at work already in the Gospels, all redacted in the generations after Paul, which each develop the 'Jewish' face of 'anti-intellectualism' for their own purposes, in their own contexts, and in keeping with the needs of the various communities that produced them. It is, for example, the Matthean community's particular relationship to its surrounding Jewish context that produces the Gospel of Matthew's praise to God for having blinded the wise ('because you have hidden these things from wise and intelligent people and have revealed them to infants', 11.25), and gives those wise

³ Philosophy also had its defenders in early Christianity, most prominent among them Origen. See for example in his *Contra Celsum* his discussion of I Cor 1 at 1.13 and 3.47-48, his defense of logic at 1.2, and his argument that the Bible does not discourage philosophy at 6.7. See also *Philocalia* 13 comparing the Christian use of philosophy with the Hebrews' despoiling of the Egyptians. But the anti-philosophical strand I am describing was strong: witness Origen's own fate, not only in Late Antiquity, but also at the hands of later critics like Luther (who accuses him of corrupting Christianity with an arrogant confidence in the 'works' of human reason).

⁴ 'Masks': F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Vintage, 1989, pp. 1-2. Compare section 40 of the same work, on the mask as a necessary form of presentation for every 'great spirit' 'Figures': see E. Auerbach, 'Figura', *Neue Dantestudien*, (Istanbuler Schriften, 5), Istanbul: Ibrahim Horoz Basimevi, 1944, pp. 11-71.

men the specific form of the Pharisees, who are blinded by their desire to be reckoned learned and called 'teacher, Rabbi.'⁵

It is important to remember that the ethnic forms given to these soterio-epistemological anxieties in what would become Christian scripture were not monolithic or unchanging. But it is equally important to notice that they were enduring, and that the fact that they could be transformed by time and context in no way diminished their power. On the contrary, these ethnic forms proved so powerful across the long history of Christian thought precisely because they were flexible enough to underpin a critical language capable of encompassing the cosmos.

In Galatians 2.14, for example, Paul had deployed the term 'Judaizing' to mean the error by which a gentile convert to Jesus (i.e., *not* a Jew) places mistaken emphasis on the literal, material, fleshy, legal, and historical aspects of Judaism and its scripture, rather than on their spiritual meaning. Following Paul's more general logic (for example, in the opening chapter to the Romans), later Christian thinkers expanded the category of 'Judaizing' further to signify the danger of a Christian paying excessive or misplaced attention to the created world rather than to the creator. Throughout the long history of this critical discourse, 'philosophers' would remain at particular risk. In the early thirteenth century, for example, the Parisian commentators who produced the moralized bibles dedicated some 20 commentary texts and images to juxtaposing the new schools of Aristotelian philosophy with Pharisees, Jews, and Rabbis. 'Synagoga cries out to her philosophers,' they proclaimed, in their attempt to condemn what they cast as miss-placed curiosity, materialism, and pride in human reason. But the underlying logic was a general one, capable of condemning not only philosophers but every Christian excessively attracted to the world or curious about Creation. In the much later (1633) words of the English poet George Herbert:

'He that doth love, and love amisse,
This worlds delights before true Christian joy,
Hath made a Jewish choice.
.... And is a Judas Jew'.⁶

⁵ A good introduction to the question of gospel community and audience can be found in R. Bauckham, *Re-thinking the Gospel audiences*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998. On the Matthean community specifically see among others D.C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: the History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998; A.J. Saldarini, 'The Gospel of Matthew and Jewish Christian Conflict' in *Social History of the Matthean Community* (ed. D. Balch), Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, pp. 38-61; D.R.A. Hare, 'How Jewish Is the Gospel of Matthew?', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62/2 (2000), pp. 264-277; J.F. O'Grady, 'The Community of Matthew', *Chicago Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001), pp. 239-250.

These opening remarks should at least make plausible the possibility that as historians we should speak, both of a continuous Christian habit of thinking about the uses of human reason in 'Jewish' terms (I will return to the fate of the 'Gentiles' in this discourse), and of the constant transformation in the meaning and content of these terms. To put it provocatively, there is a history of thought that binds Matthew's first century criticism of learned Pharisees, and 20th century dicta such as Joseph Goebbels's proclamation (at the Nazi burning of 'Un-German books' in 1933) that 'the age of rampant Jewish intellectualism is at an end,' or the observation of an Austrian Reichsrat representative in 1907 that 'Culture is what one Jew plagiarizes from another.'⁷ But that history is neither stable nor deterministic. Its own meaning is itself constantly transformed by the uses to which it is put, and by the new potentials those uses discover. When historians of ideas forget either of these aspects—that is, when we minimize the structural power of these habits of thought on the one hand, insisting solely on 'context'; or when on the other we treat that power as monolithic or determining, ignoring the play and possibility we nowadays call agency—we vastly impoverish, sometimes even falsify, the questions we are asking.

There are too many ways in which that impoverishment can take place, but let us consider only one. When we discover a thinker or an idea being labeled 'Jewish' in the past, how do we choose between the 'hermeneutic' and the 'real' (to use, for the moment, two inadequate terms) as explanations? If the religious categories (such as 'Jewish') with which medieval Christian thinkers made their classifications were generated within the framework of Christological habits of thought, they need not (and often did not) correspond to 'real' attributes of the religions they invoked. The early thirteenth-century philosophers associated with the Synagogue in the moralized Bibles mentioned above were not 'real Jews' but Christians. We may, as historians of ideas, want to identify some Jewish thinkers (such as Maimonides) whose work seems to have influenced more or less directly the arguments of some early thirteenth century Parisian philosophers. But the 'Jewishness' of philosophers in the discourse of the society within which they lived and worked was as much (or more) the product of certain habits of Christian thought, as it was of a direct link to any 'real' cultures of Judaism or the thought of any 'real' Jew.

⁶ See G. Herbert, 'Self-Condensation', *The Temple. Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, Cambridge: T. Buck and R. Daniel, 1635, p. 165. On the engagement with philosophy in the moralized bibles see S. Lipton, *Images of Intolerance. The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée*, Berkeley – Los Angeles (CA): University of California Press, 1999. The reference here is to Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Ms. 2554, fol. 10a.

⁷ 'Kultur ist was ein Jud' vom anderen abschreibt', quoted in F. Heer, *Land in der Strom der Zeit*, Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1958, p. 295.

The problem is more general, in part because ‘Jews’ are not the only figures of thought that emerged within Christian culture to represent the mistaken deployment of human reason, though they are fundamental ones. We find a different figure, for example, in the treatise ‘On Free Will’ that Lorenzo Valla addressed to the Bishop of Lerida ca. 1440:

‘Let us [Christians] fear lest we be similar to the philosophers, who calling themselves wise, are made fools; who... disputed about everything, raising their voice to the sky,... like those proud and reckless giants, who were cast down to earth by the potent arm of God, and buried in the inferno.... Among the first of these was Aristotle, in whom the highest God made manifest and condemned the pride and temerity both of the self-same Aristotle and of the other philosophers’.⁸

Here not Jews but giants provide the figure for the deadly pride that marches along with the thirst for knowledge and the philosophical exercise of reason. Yet giants have a history just as long as the Jews, and indeed Valla stands in the middle of an ‘anti-giant’ tradition almost as long as the ‘anti-Jewish’ one that I just stretched from the Gospels to Goebbels. For Philo and Josephus in the first century, Nimrod was the architect not only of the tower of Babel, but also of the blasphemous idea that humans (in Josephus’ words) owe ‘their prosperity not to God but to their own valor.’ Or as Philo put it in ‘On Giants’ (66), Abraham oriented human reason toward God, but Nimrod taught the ‘sons of earth’ to turn their reason toward ‘the inert nature of the flesh (καὶ ἀκίνητον σαρκῶν φύσιν)’.⁹ G.F.W. Hegel, writing some 1700 years later, placed the hapless Nimrod in a similar place at the very opening of *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*. In Hegel’s his-

⁸ L. Valla, *De Libero Arbitrio* (ed. M. Anfossi), Firenze: Leo Olschki, 1934, pp. 50-51: ‘[T]imeamus ne simus philosophorum similes, qui dicentes se sapientes, stulti facti sunt; qui ...de omnibus disputabant apponentes in caelum os suum... quasi superbi ac temerarii gigantes, a potenti brachio Dei in terram praecipitati sunt, atque in inferno, ut Typhoeus in Sicilia, consepulti. Quorum in primis fuit Aristoteles, in quo Deus optimus maximus superbiam ac temeritatem cum ipsius Aristotelis, tum ceterorum philosophorum patefecit atque adeo damnavit.’

⁹ See Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, I.113-4, trans. W. Whiston, Hertfordshire (UK): Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2006, p. 16; Philo, *De Gigantibus*, 66. Cf. Babylonian Talmud tractate Chagigah 13a, which uses Nimrod to illustrate rebellion against God in the context of excessive intellectual curiosity, citing Ben Sira/*Ecclesiasticus* 3.21-22: ‘Seek not things that are too hard for thee, and search not things that are hidden from thee. The things that have been permitted thee, think thereupon; thou hast no business with the things that are secret’. The early Christian exegetical tradition on Nimrod was vast, including authors and works as diverse as the *Clementina*, Theophilus of Antioch, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius, Gregory of Nazianzen, Epiphanius, and John Chrysostom, but that is a subject for a different article.

tory of thought the giant was the first empiricist, the founder of a philosophy that mistakenly sought man's happiness in the conquest of nature and the material world because it was blinded by the seeming reality of things.

It may seem that—as figures for the projection of Christian anxieties about the powers of reason—giants do not pose the same risks that Jews do, since there are few living giants who might suffer from the projection. Moreover, since it seems easier to distinguish the giants that stalk Christian hermeneutics from any that may walk the earth, we might think that their use as figures does not confuse in the same way that 'Jews' do our attempts, as historians, to distinguish between the discursive and the real. But that relief is exaggerated, insofar as it ignores the extent to which these representations are structurally inter-dependent: they can be mapped upon, derive from, and even produce one another. Hegel's *Spirit of Christianity* is itself an excellent example of how this inter-dependence can work: his Nimrod is merely the first opposition in a dialectic against which the central figure of Abraham and his Judaism can emerge, a figure that then animates Hegel's entire history of the human spirit's unfolding.

Lorenzo Valla's characterization of Aristotle was probably inspired by an earlier example of such mapping. Nimrod stands tall in the eight and ninth circles of Dante's *Inferno* (because of his height, two circles of hell were required), roaring out his sins in a supposedly unintelligible language. For Dante, as for much of the medieval Christian tradition, Nimrod was both the defiant builder of the tower of Babel (leading to the confusion of tongues), and the founder of mathematical astronomy, the 'Babylonian' science of rendering the future and the celestial gods predictable. He was therefore a perfect figure for hubristic belief in human agency, and for the blasphemy that attends (according to the strands of Christian theology we are studying here) excessive attention to natural or 'scientific' reason. The late Richard Lemay focused upon this latter use of Nimrod in the medieval tradition. And he suggested that, despite the text's claim that Nimrod is unintelligible, he is actually bellowing in Arabic, and that what he is shouting in that language is a condemnation of the science for which he has been condemned.¹⁰

Perhaps we should not be too definitive about Nimrod's Arabic, but his tongue does plunge us into the middle of yet another discursive tradition, that of representing excessive concern with natural reason in Muslim terms. This tradition

¹⁰ On Dante's Nimrod see R. Lemay, 'De la scolastique à l'histoire par le truchement de la philologie: itinéraire d'un médiéviste entre Europe et Islam', *Critica del testo* 14:2 (2011), pp. 523-43. Compare Hegel's use of Nimrod in *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*, written in 1799 but not published until the beginning of the twentieth century, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften: nach den Handschriften der Kgl. Bibliothek in Berlin* (ed. Herman Nohl), Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1907.

too, is venerable, though of necessity (since Islam is younger) less ancient than that of giants or Jews, with which it is however inter-related. Abelard provides an early Western example: in his *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian* (written circa 1141-42), he casts the philosophical champion of natural reason in the guise of a circumcised Muslim. Abelard may have been alluding (as Jean Jolivet suggested in 1964) to near-contemporary Muslim rationalist philosophers like the Zaragozan Abū Bakr ibn al Ṣāigh (aka Ibn Badjdja, Avempacem).¹¹ But the association of natural philosophy with Islam (and vice-versa) was in fact more general, and derived as much (or more) from Christian habits of thinking about Islam as a religion oriented entirely toward love of the material world, as it did from knowledge of any particular Muslim philosopher. It was in this mode that, some two centuries later, Petrarch condemned Islamic verse and Islamic medicine simultaneously, associating both with pure carnality removed from any redemptive spirit: 'You know the Arabs as physicians. I know them as poets: nothing softer, more feeble, more spineless, more lewd. What more can I say? It is difficult for anyone to convince me that something good could come from Arabia.' (*Seniles* XVI, 2)¹²

We can find a lovely representation of this tradition as late as the mid seventeenth century, in Ferdinand Bol's painting 'The Philosopher' (ca. 1650), in which turban and beard serve as powerful pictorial shorthand for the subjects preoccupations with the world (preoccupations further represented in the terrestrial globes that people his study). Within this pre-modern Western Christian tradition Islam represented an error almost the inverse of the one it is sometimes

¹¹ J. Jolivet, 'Abélard et le Philosophe (Occident et Islam au Xiie siècle)', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 164 (1963), pp. 181-189. See also Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their impact on Islamic thought*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, p. 216. See also Rémi Brague, 'L'entrée d'Aristote en Europe: l'intermédiaire arabe', *Aristote, l'École de Chartres et la cathédrale*, Chartres: Assoc. des Amis du Centre Médiéval Européen de Chartre, 1997, pp. 73-79, esp. p. 77.

¹² Petrarch, *Invective contra medicum*, in *Opere latine*, ed. A. Bufano, Turin, 1987, p. 888: 'Arabes quales medici tu scis. Quales autem poetae, scio ego: nihil blandius, nihil mollius, nihil enervatius, nihil denique turpius. Et quid multa, vix mihi persuadebitur ab Arabia posse aliquid boni esse.' See also F. Gabrieli, 'Petrarca e gli Arabi', *al-Andalus*, 42 (1977), pp. 241-248; M. Mancini, 'Petrarca e la poetica degli Arabi', in P. Bagni and M. Pistoso (eds.), *Poetica medievale tra Oriente e Occidente*, Rome: Carocci, 2003, pp. 211-222. On Petrarch's knowledge of Arabic poetry see C. Burnett, 'Learned Knowledge of Arabic Poetry, Rhymed Prose, and Didactic Verse from Petrus Alfonsi to Petrarch', in J. Marenbon (ed.), *Poetry and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: A Festschrift for Peter Dronke*, (*Mittellateinische Studien und Texte* 29), Leiden: Brill, 2001, pp. 29-62. On humanistic associations of certain medical traditions with Islam, see P. Dilg, 'The Anti-Arabism in the Medicine of Humanism', in *La diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel Medio Evo europeo*, Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1987, pp. 269-289.

deployed to represent in Christian discourses of our own day (such as that of Pope Benedict XVI): a fanaticism of reason, rather than a fanaticism of faith.

If 'Jewish-ness,' 'Muslim-ness,' and even 'Giant-ness' are critical categories within Christian thought, as well as attributes of lived religions, this means that when we encounter claims of 'Judaism' or 'Islam' (or Gigantism) in Christian critical discourse, these need not be the product of contact with a real or living Judaism or Islam. Christian thought is capable of generating the Jewish-ness or Muslim-ness of its object 'out of its own entrails' (I borrow the metaphor from Marx' observations on Christian society's generation of Judaism in 'On the Jewish Question'). But of course there are also living communities of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and there is such a thing as 'real' contact between identified members of those communities, 'real' exchanges of ideas, texts, objects, knowledge. Can we as historians distinguish between Jewish-ness or Muslim-ness that is 'hermeneutically' produced from within a Christian cultural logic, and what is 'sociologically' or 'genealogically' produced by inter-religious contact and exchange?¹³

Before attempting to confront the question, let us pause for a moment to outline the stakes. Questions of what Christian Europe owes to Judaism or Islam have long been polemical. We have already cited a (very) few of countless available pre-modern examples, and these polemics certainly did not cease with the incorporation into the Christian West, first of large Jewish populations in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then of large Muslim ones in the twentieth and twenty-first. On the contrary, these incorporations only made our questions more pressing and more polemical. Some thinkers responded (and continue to respond) to these pressures by attempting to bring Jews and Muslims into the history of Europe, encouraging the view of Europe as a Judeo-Christian, and more recently Islamo-Christian, Civilization. Others worked (and continue to work) to exclude the Jewish and the Islamic from any of the vital streams of European history and culture, and even to portray these cultures and their living representatives as inimical to the values of the West. We need not name names, for the debate has animated a vast historiography over the last two centuries, as well as much of the politics of modernity, thereby inscribing itself upon the living flesh of untold millions of Jews and Muslims (and also Christians), both within Europe and outside of it.

¹³ NB: Even this formulation of the distinction —hermeneutical vs. sociological— is itself already vastly over-simplified, not least because we can easily imagine both phenomena functioning at once. The ancient Pharisees would not have recognized themselves in their Gospel portraits; any more than the worshippers of a Frankfurt synagogue would subscribe to the Judaism described in the philosophies of a Kant or Hegel. But this does not mean that the thinking of a Hegel, a Kant, or gospel author did not emerge in some sense from their lived experience of Judaism. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Islam.

This means that the claims we medievalists make about the Jewish-ness, Muslim-ness, or Christian-ness of a given text, idea, or practice are made within a highly polarizing field of force, and bear a considerable political and ethical burden. Consider something as specialized and esoteric as the long debate about the influence of Arabic poetry upon European vernacular verse.¹⁴ How should we think, to pick a specific example, of the relationship between Dante—often understood as the pivotal figure in the European poetic tradition—and Islam?

Many scholars have helped us hear resonances with Islam in specific registers of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, ranging from the structuring conceit of his voyage to the otherworld, to the metaphysics of light in the *Paradiso*, resonances that some have tried to link to specific Islamic sources.¹⁵ Others have attributed Dante's entire allegorical strategy for elevating secular poetry into a form of knowledge capable of reaching the divine (sometimes called Dante's 'theological poetics') to similar poetic strategies in Islamic mysticism; and seen in his negotiation of the tension between revealed and human forms of knowledge (a problematic within which this theological poetics is embedded) the influence of an Islamic philosophical tradition perhaps best represented by Averroes. According to this view, the space for secular poetry that Dante is said to have opened within Christian culture was chiseled with Islamic tools.¹⁶

On the other hand, the coordinates along which Dante himself charted his negotiation of this tension are quite different. He names Aristotle (*Par.* XXVI 37-39), Moses (40-42), and John the Evangelist (43-45): no Averroes, no Ibn Tufayl, no Maimonides. And we could plausibly see—as Ernst Robert Curtius and many other distinguished explorers of Dante's 'theological poetics' did—his allegorical strate-

¹⁴ It was in the context of this debate that María Rosa Menocal borrowed Harold Bloom's term 'the anxiety of influence' in order to argue that the poets who developed Christian vernacular lyric repressed their debt to the Arabic tradition, see M. R. Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, second edition 2004.

¹⁵ In the early twentieth century Miguel Asín Palacios famously pointed out the relationship between the Arabic *Scala Mahometi* and Dante's structure. See more recently C. Saccone, 'Postface', in *Il Libro della scala di Maometto*, in R. Rossi Testa (ed.), Milan, 1991, pp. 155-198. On the Arabic sources for Dante see in particular the several works of Maria Corti, summarized in M. Corti, 'Dante and Islamic Culture', *Dante Studies* 125 (2007) (special issue, *Dante and Islam*), pp. 57-75. At p. 69-70 Corti suggests that Dante's metaphysics of light in the *Paradiso* derives from Bonaventure of Bologna's *Tractatus de luce*, which cites Alhazen, Avicenna, Averroes, al-Fārābī and other Muslim authors.

¹⁶ See P.A. Cantor, 'The Uncanonical Dante: the *Divine Comedy* and Islamic Philosophy' in *Philosophy and Literature* 20 (1996), pp. 138-153; C. Baffioni, 'Aspetti della cosmologia islamica in Dante', in A. Ghisalberti (ed.), *Il pensiero filosofico e teologico di Dante Alighieri*, Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2001, pp. 103-122.

gies emerging entirely from tensions and interpretive potentials that are autochthonous to medieval Christian hermeneutics.¹⁷

The stakes in these debates are high. Depending on the position we take, we can split our vision of Dante. At one extreme, he can serve as a figure for the 'Christian' roots of a distinctly Western European poetics. At the other, he is a figure whose silence about his Islamic sources—indeed his critique of Islam and Islamic 'science'—becomes an act of repression, a powerful symptom of 'une maladie de l'histoire occidentale, liée à l'occultation de sa part philosophique arabe et juive [...] éblématique du statut fait à la pensée arabo-musulmane dans l'histoire de la formation de la conscience européenne [...] du mouvement d'inclusion/exclusion qui, à sa source même, habite la rationalité européenne'.¹⁸

I do not pretend to contribute to the details of the debate over Dante's relationship with Islam. That debate does, however, provide us with a good example of how the relatively esoteric questions and cultural classifications of medievalists can lead all too quickly to the praise or blame of an entire civilization. It is precisely for this reason that I find it so important to insist that, although we may wish to distinguish analytically between the 'hermeneutic' and the 'sociological' (to continue using, for the moment, these two inadequate words to characterize our distinction), the two are mutually constituted and therefore to some degree empirically inseparable. In other words, the classifications in question (Islamic, Jewish, Christian) are not just the product but also the tools, the categories of thought, through which the communities and individuals we are studying (Muslim and Jewish as well as Christian) historically produced their history. Since those categories are themselves being produced (or perhaps better, co-produced) within as well as between the cultures we are studying, our attempts to understand their production need to take into account not only processes of exchange and influence (or its repressed cousin, 'anxiety of influence'), but also other phenomena with a very different relationship to the 'real,' such as (for example) projection.

¹⁷ E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern: A. Franke, 1948, pp. 219–32; A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100 - c.1375: the Commentary-Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 373–94. See also Petrarch, *Familiars*, ed. V. Rossi, *Le familiari*, Florence: Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Francesco Petrarca 11, 1934, 10.4, pp. 301–10, 'de proportione inter theologiam et poetiam' pp. 301–10.

¹⁸ The quote is from A. de Libera, *Introduction in Averroes, Discours décisif*, tr. M. Geoffroy, Paris: Flammarion, 1996, p. 83, cited by Leonardo Capezzone in his forthcoming 'Intorno Alla Rimozione delle Fonti Arabe dalla storia della Cultura Medievale Europea, e sul silenzio de Dante,' from which I have benefitted immensely. I thank Professor Capezzone for sharing his article with me in advance of publication.

This does not mean that we should avoid inquiry into the transmission or exchange of knowledge between the cultures we call (somewhat reductively) Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It only means that, as we do so, we need to be aware of the degree to which these categories were themselves being produced both hermeneutically and sociologically within the contexts we are studying. Let us therefore give some more detailed attention to a specific historical example through which we can cultivate, if not a methodology, then at least an awareness of the difficulties a methodology should address.

* * *

By the time that Diego Rodriguez de Almela reported the story of Alfonso the Wise's 'blasphemy'—that is, his claim that human knowledge could have improved upon God's creation—the story was already centuries old. The accusation enters the chronicle tradition only in the middle of the fourteenth century, but it had probably surfaced already in Alfonso's own reign, during the rebellions against his rule that began in 1272 and marked the last decade of his kingship until his death in 1284, with his authority more or less confined to the region surrounding the city of Seville.¹⁹

Neither Judaism nor Islam are mentioned in the accusation of Alfonso's blasphemy, but they were certainly on the minds of Alfonso's critics. Already in the first uprisings of 1270-1275, rebellious grandes complained about Jews in royal service, and even took some of these Jews hostage. After repressing the rebellion Alfonso began once again to entrust Jews with administrative tasks. In 1276, for example, he assigned Isaac ibn Zadok (aka Çag de la Maleha) an important role in the management of tax collection. Under increasing pressure from a second rebellion emerging under the leadership of Alfonso's son, the future Sancho IV,

¹⁹ The first mention in the chronicle tradition appears in the *Crónica General de Espanha de 1344* of Pedro de Barcelos, see L.F., Lyndley Cintra (ed.), *Crónica General de Espanha de 1344*, Lisboa: Academia Portuguesa da Historia, 1900. On the story, its transmission, and its later uses, see especially L. Funes, 'La blasfemia del Rey Sabio: itinerario narrativo de una leyenda (primera parte)', *Incipit* 13 (1993), pp. 51-70; and 'La blasfemia del Rey Sabio: itinerario narrativo de una leyenda (segunda parte)', *Incipit* 14 (1994), pp. 69-101. Funes argues for the emergence of the accusation in Alfonso's own lifetime. On the later use of the story against King Peter 'the Cruel' see also E. Mitre Fernandez, 'La historiografía bajomedieval ante la revolución trastámara: Propaganda política y moralismo', in *Estudios de historia medieval: Homenaje a Luis Suarez*, Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid. Secretariado de Publicaciones, 1991, pp. 332-347.

Alfonso was by 1279 forced to order the imprisonment of many Jews in his service, and the hanging of Isaac/Çag.

It was in that year that a council of the kingdom's bishops condemned the king as (in the words of Peter Linehan) 'a barely Christian tyrant manipulated by Jewish counselors, intent upon subjecting churchmen to an intolerable yoke of persecution and servitude.' Accusations such as these played an important role in justifying and mobilizing the coalition of princes, churchmen, nobles, and municipalities that deprived Alfonso of his kingdom (though not officially of his crown). Alfonso's rivals were (when it suited them to be) exaggeratedly aware of Jews and Muslims in the king's household, government, and political strategy. Presumably they were just as aware of the roles played by these 'enemies of God' in some of Alfonso's intellectual projects, as well.²⁰

In short, Alfonso's critics nourished their discourse with Jews and Muslims of flesh and blood. But this does not mean that the discourse was not also very much the product of Christian hermeneutics. In other articles I've tried to explain why certain functions of governance and administration—such as the title and office of *privado*, or favored and intimate councilor—were criticized as 'Jewish' in thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth-century Castile, even though the bearers of these titles and occupants of these offices were generally Christian. The Christian figuration of certain forms of secular power as 'Jewish' was—or so I argue—as important to the rise of these critiques of governance as was the presence of living Jews in administration. But here our topic is science, not sovereignty. So let us focus on supposed excesses of royal reason, rather than of governance.²¹

²⁰ For a narrative account, see Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols., trans L. Schoffman, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 120-37. See also J.M. Nieto Soria, 'Los judíos de Toledo en sus relaciones financieras con la monarquía y la Iglesia (1252-1312)', *Sefarad* 41 (1981), pp. 301-319; and 'Los judíos de Toledo en sus relaciones financieras con la monarquía y la Iglesia (1252-1312)', *Sefarad* 42 (1982), pp. 79-102. On the episcopal complaints, and on Sancho's role in investigating and amplifying them, see P. Linehan 'The Spanish Church Revisited: the Episcopal Gravamina of 1279', in B. Tierney and P. Linehan (eds.), *Authority and Power: Studies on Medieval Law and Government Presented to Walter Ullmann on his Seventieth Birthday*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 127-147, with quote at p. 137. The bishops' complaints about the corrupting effect of the Jews is transcribed on p. 146. For examples of Sancho's anti-Jewish measures during the rebellion in 1282 see p. 136, note 37.

²¹ On the *privado* see D. Nirenberg, 'Christian Love, Jewish 'Privacy,' and Medieval Kingship', in *Center and Periphery: Studies on Power in the Medieval World*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013); id., 'Christian Sovereignty and Jewish Flesh', in S. Nichols, A. Kablitz and A. Calhoun (eds.), *Rethinking the Medieval Senses*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp. 154-185; id., 'Devi-

Here too, it is easy enough to discover figures and figurations. Consider the anonymous thirteenth-century *Libro de Alexandre*.²² The *Libro*'s hero, Alexander the Great, is very much at risk from learning. Two moments in the hero's career suffice to make the risk clear: his childhood and his death. As a child Alexander was such a good student –'tant avié buen engeño e sotil coraçon' [17]– that a rumor began to spread that he was not the son of King Philip, but of his tutor Nectanebo: 'Por su sotil engeño que tant' apoderava/ a maestre Nectánabo dizién que semejava,/ e que su fijo era grant roído andava' [19]. (In other European literary traditions Nectanebo is indeed presented as the father of Alexander, having used his magical arts to inseminate Alexander's mother Olympias, a scene vividly illustrated, for example, in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. fr. 50, 120v). The Castilian Alexander solved the problem as every hero should: he threw Nectanebo from the high tower on which they were stargazing, killing the excessively 'subtle' and learned monarch into which his intellect and his tutor threatened to convert him.

But tutors are easier to terminate than intellectual ambition, and it is intellectual pride that proves the hero's undoing. Just after Alexander, now a great conqueror, delivers a sermon on the insatiable pride (*sobervia*) of all creatures in creation (from angels to fish), the Castilian poet interrupts his narration with an excursus missing from his sources:

'Quiero dexar el rey Quiero de su sobervia Quiérovos la materia Pero será en cabo	en las naves folgar un poquillo fablar, un poquillo dexar, todo a un lugar.	[2324]
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La Natura que cría Las que son paladinas Tovo que Alexandre Que querié conquistar	todas las criaturas, e las que son oscuras, dixo palabras duras. las secretas naturas.	[2325]
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En las cosas secretas Que nunca omne bivo Quísolas Alexandre Nunca mayor sobervia	quiso él entender las pudo ant saber; por fuerça conocer, comidió Luçifer.	[2327]
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ant politics and Jewish Love: Alfonso VIII and the Jewess of Toledo', *Jewish History* 21 (2007), pp. 15-41.

²² See *Libro de Alexandre*, ed. Jesús Cañas, Madrid: Catedra, 5th ed. 2007.

Pesó al Criador	que criou la Natura,	[2329]
Ovo de Alexandre	saña e grant rencura,	
Dixo: 'este lunático	que non cata medida,	
Yol tornare el gozo	todo en amargura'.	

The poet tells us somewhat anachronistically that since the Muslims and the Jews (and the serpents) all fear Alexander's sword too much to be instruments of Nature's revenge, she had to turn to other allies. Descending into Hell she warns Beelzebub that Alexander intends to conquer and chain both Nature and Death, and demands that, in repayment of the underworld she carved out for him after his exile from Heaven, he help her eliminate the hubristic hero. Satan summons council, and Treason proposes the plan to poison the world conqueror. The instrument of death is a meaningful one as well. Immediately upon drinking the tainted wine Alexander realizes that he has been poisoned and reaches for an antidote, a feather or quill with which to make himself vomit:

'Metío el rey la péñola por amor de tornar' [2617]

'Amor,' 'tornar': the vocabulary of love and conversion here is meant to remind us that salvation as well as life is at stake. Alas for Alexander, the quill too has been dipped in poison, and the second dose proves fatal:

'non podrié peor fuego	en su cuerpo entrar, [2617]
enveninó las venas	que pudo alcançar,
en lugar de guarir,	fízolas peorar'.

In this feather we might recognize the implement of the learned, and in its poison, the dangers of such learning in Christian thought. This is, in fact, the moral with which the poem concludes its several thousand stanzas:

'La gloria deste mundo,	quien bien quiere asmar, [2671]
Más que la flor del campo	non la deve preçiar,
Ca quando omne cuida	más seguro estar,
Échalo de cabeça	en el peor lugar'.

Though the *Libro* cannot be dated with precision, its composition is generally placed in the first half of the thirteenth century, before the rebellions that marked the end of Alfonso's reign. Nevertheless, the moral explanation it provides for Alexander's fall is the same as that which will be proposed for Alfonso's: a blasphemous command of creation and an insatiable desire to know the secrets

of nature.²³ We might expect an awareness of such Christian figurations and their potential power to have left a trace of apologetics in the activities of the Alfonsine scriptorium (or perhaps better, scriptoria). But if we judge from the prologues to the earlier scientific works and translations they produced, Alfonso and his collaborators had little anxiety about the ‘un-Christian’ nature of the knowledge they were collecting, transmitting, and creating. On the contrary, they did not hesitate to represent the king as the impresario of their activities, activities that explicitly crossed confessional boundaries.

The prologue of a book of natural history Alfonso commissioned in 1250, a ‘Lapidary’ describing the magic properties and healing qualities of gems and stones, is in this sense representative:²⁴

‘He [Alfonso] obtained it in Toledo of a Jew who held it hidden, who neither wished to make use of it himself nor that any other should profit therefrom. And when he [Alfonso] had this book in his possession, he caused another Jew, who was his physician, to read it, and he was called Jehuda Mosca *el menor* [Yehuda ben Moshe ha-Kohen] and he was learned in the art of astrology and understood well both Arabic and Latin. And when through this Jew his physician he understood the value and great profit which was in the book, he commanded him to translate it from Arabic into the Castilian language’.²⁵

²³ The Spanish literary tradition will continue to use both Alexander and Nimrod to think about intellectual hubris, and even occasionally bring them together, as Sempronio does in Act I of *La Celestina* (published in 1499): ‘Oh what a cowardly son of a whore! What a Nimrod, what an Alexander the Great, who thought themselves worthy, not only to rule the world, but heaven as well!’ Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, tr. Lesley Byrd Simpson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955, p. 7.

²⁴ For an introduction to the figure of Yehuda and his corpus of scientific translations, see N. Roth, ‘Jewish Collaborators in Alfonso’s Scientific Work’, in R.I. Burns (ed.), *Emperor of Culture: Alfonso X the Learned of Castile and His Thirteenth-Century Renaissance*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, pp. 59–71, esp. 60–66. For a more extensive study of this character, see G. Hilty, *El libro Conplido en los Iudizios de las Estrellas. Partes 6 a 8*, Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Islámicos y del Oriente Próximo, 2005.

²⁵ ‘Hasta que quiso Dios que viniese a manos del noble rey don Alfonso, hijo del muy noble rey don Ferrando V y de la reina doña Beatriz, el Señor de Castilla, de Toledo, de León, de Galicia, de Sevilla, de Córdoba, de Murcia, de Jaén, y del Algarbe. Y halló en siendo infante, en vida de su padre, en el año que ganó el reino de Murcia, que fue en la Era de [sic]./ Y hubo en Toledo, de un judío que él tenía escondido, que no se quería aprovechar de él, ni que a otro tuviese pro. Y de que este libro tuvo en su poder, hizolo leer a otro su judío, que era su físico y dícenle Yudah Mosca el Menor, que era mucho entendido en el arte de astronomía, y sabía y entendía bien el arábigo y el latín./ Y de que por este judío, su físico, hubo entendido el bien y la gran pro que en él yacía, mandóselo trasladar de arábigo en lenguaje castellano por que los hombres lo entendiesen mejor y se supiesen de él más aprovechar. Y ayudole en este trasladamiento Garci Pérez, un su clérigo que era otrosí mu-

The two miniatures that illustrate this prologue in the Lapidary's most sumptuous manuscript (Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, MS. h.I.15, produced in the 1270s)²⁶ juxtapose the portrait of the king receiving the book from his two translators, Yehuda Mosca and the cleric Garci Pérez, with a scene of Aristotle lecturing to a gathering of scholars (some of whom may themselves be represented as Jews, judging from their hats). Alfonso is here presented (see *Illustration 1*), without any anxiety, as a patron and master of all manners of learning.

Nor do Alfonso and his translators seem to have worried much about the possibility that their cross-confessional intellectual inquiries could invite charges of blasphemy or unbelief. In fact they appear so unconcerned that in their 1261 translation of the *Kalila wa-Dimna* from Arabic, they included Ibn al-Muqaffa's Prologue, a text expurgated from other medieval European translations because of its explicit emphasis on the power of skeptical reason.

That text is particularly pertinent to our question, because it charts an itinerary leading from anti-scientific orthodoxy to rationalist unbelief. Its narrator begins with the conviction that diseases of the soul are worse than those of the body, and that therefore the physical sciences (including medicine) are to be neglected in favor of the spiritual:

'Et fallé que la enfermedad del anima es la mayor enfermedad. Et por eso desprecié la fisica y trabagéme la ley et ove ende sabor, et dubdé de la fisica et no fallé en sus escrituras mejoría de ninguna ley'.

But when he began to study religions, the narrator found them all at variance. Worse, their proponents justified their belief through habit, profit, violence, or simplicity, rather than through reason:

'Et fallé las leyes mucho alongadas et las setas muchas, et aquellos que las tenían avíanlas heredado de sus padres, et otros que las tenían avidas por fuerça et otros que querían aver por ellas este mundo, et que se trabajavan a ganar con ellas en sus vidas, et otros entendidos de sinples voluntades que no dubdan que tienen la verdat et non tienen buena razón a quien les fiziese questão sobre ello'.

cho entendido en este saber de astronomía.' English translation in E.S. Procter, 'The Scientific Works of the Court of Alfonso X of Castile: The King and His Collaborators', *Modern Language Review* 40 (1945): 12-29, esp. 19. Note that the prologue to the Lapidario places the origins of the work in an 'inter-cultural' context. Its author, Abolays, although a Muslim, appreciates the gentiles of Chaldea (because he is descended from them), knows their language, and is moved to search out their books.

²⁶ The facsimile edition is Alfonso X el Sabio, 1982. For a study of the illuminations, see A. Domínguez Rodríguez, *Astrología y arte en el Lapidario de Alfonso X el Sabio*, Madrid: EDILÁN, 1984.

In the end, after consulting with the wisest of each law, the questing narrator realizes that none of them can give rational account of their beliefs, and he determines to follow nothing that reason could not approve.

‘Et nin fallé en ninguna dellas razón que fuse verdadera nin derecha, nin tal que la creyese como entendido et non la contradixiese con razón. Et después que esto vi, non fallé carrera por donde siguieses a ninguno dellos. Et sope que, si yo creyese lo que non sopiese, que sería atal commo el ladrón engañado que fabla en un enxemplo’.²⁷

From these products of Alfonso’s scriptorium, we might imagine that the figurations with which we began had no grip on the king or his collaborators. Yet in other products of Alfonso’s workshop we can certainly discern traces of anxiety. The *Cantigas de Santa María* are an obvious place to look. In fact already in the fourteenth-century, chroniclers mentioned the *Cantigas* as Alfonso’s penance for his scientific hubris: it is thanks to the *Cantigas*, according to one author, that despite his blasphemy, Alfonso went to Purgatory rather than to Hell.²⁸

A striking example of our anxiety — especially in comparison to a text like the *Calila e Dimna* — is *Cantiga* 209, written by the king himself, and entitled ‘Muito faz grand’ erro e en torto jaz, a Deus quen lle nega o ben que lle faz’: He who denies God and His blessings commits a great error and is grievously wrong. In it the king relates how in 1270, when he was taken gravely ill and seemed about to die, he refused the sciences of the body and the advice of his medical doctors, and turned to religious faith instead. The *Cantiga* is illustrated on fol. 119v of MS. B.R. 20—the Florence Codex (see *Illustration 2*).

²⁷ *Calila e Dimna, Historia de Bercebuey*, ed. J.M. Cacho Blecua y M.J. Lacarra, Madrid: Castalia, 1984, pp. 108-9. My thanks to Mercedes García-Arenal for bringing this text to my attention. The elipsis: ‘Et tove por bien otorgar a los sabios de cada una ley sus començamientos et ver qué dirían por razón de saber la verdat de la mentira, et escoger et anparar la una de la otra; et conosçida la verdat, obligarme a ella verdaderamente, et non creer lo que non cunpliese, et nin seguir lo que non entendiese. Et fize esto, et pregunté, et pensé, et non fallé ninguno dellos que me di[x]ese más que alabar a sí et a su ley et denostar la agena. Et vi manifestamente que se inclinavan a sus sabores et que por su sabor trabajavan et non por el derecho.’

²⁸ ‘E otrosi sepas por çierto que por la oraçion que fiçiste continuadamente a la gloriossa madre de Dios desde que ouiste diez e siete annos fasta oy, rogo afincadamente al alto senyor.’ BNM 431, ‘Libro de los Fueros de Castilla,’ excerpted in L. Funes, ‘La blasfemia del Rey Sabio: itinerario narrativo de una leyenda (segunda parte),’ *Incipit* 14 (1994), p. 73.

Let us compare the text with the image:²⁹

'I shall tell you what happened to me while I lay in Vitoria, so ill that all believed I should die there and did not expect me to recover.... The doctors ordered hot cloths placed on me but I refused them and ordered, instead, that Her Book be brought to me [panels 2 and 3]. They placed it on me, and at once I lay in peace [panel 4]. The pain subsided completely, I felt very well and cried no more. I gave thanks to Her for it, because I know full well She was dismayed at my afflictions [panels 5 and 6]'.³⁰

The text insists upon an orthodoxy that the *Calila e Dimna* began with but then abandoned: piety is more important than physic. To believe or act otherwise, the *Cantiga's* title warns, is to deny the benevolence of God. This seems almost an explicit rebuttal of the charge of blasphemous pride in science directed against the king. The text of the *Cantiga* does not attribute a figure, Jewish or Muslim, to this erroneous belief, but the illumination does. The illustration portrays—as Francisco Prado-Vilar pointed out in an article from which I have benefitted a great deal—the physician giving the instructions as a Jew, who then leaves for the

²⁹ This manuscript, now in Florence (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS. Banco Rari 20) was left unfinished at the king's death. The facsimile edition is Alfonso X el Sabio, 1989. This manuscript was conceived as the second volume of a single fully illustrated luxury edition of the *Cantigas* produced between 1277 and 1284. The first volume is Escorial, Biblioteca del Real Monasterio, MS. T.I.1, commonly known as *Codice Rico*, and also available in facsimile edition: Alfonso X el Sabio, 1979.

³⁰ Vos direi o que passou per mi, / jazend' en Bitoiria enfermo assi / que todos cuidavan que morress' ali / e non atendien de mi bon solaz ... ùa door me fillou atal / que eu ben cuidava que era mortal, / e braadava: 'Santa Maria, val, / e por ta vertud' aqueste mal desfaz' ... os fisicos mandavan me pøer / panos caentes, mas non o quix fazer / mas mandei o livro dela aduzer / e poseron mio, e logo jouv' en paz ... que non braadei nen senti nulla ren / da door, mas senti me logo mui ben / e dei ende graças a ela por en, ca tenno ben que de meu mal lle despraz ... Quand' esto foi, muitos eran no logar / que mostravan que avian gran pesar / de mia door e fillavan s' a chorar, / estand' ante mi todos come en az. / E pois viron a mercee que me fez / esta Virgen santa, sennor de gran prez / loaron a muito todos dessa vez / cada ùu pøend' en terra sa faz. (sts. 3-8). The standard edition of the *Cantigas* is M. López Serrano (ed.), *Cantigas de Santa María de Alfonso X el Sabio, Rey de Castilla*, Madrid: Editorial Patrimonio Nacional, 1987. This and subsequent English quotations are taken from the prose translation by K. Kulp-Hill, see Alfonso X el Sabio, *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, the Wise: a translation of the Cantigas de Santa María*, trans. K. Kulp-Hill, Tempe (AZ): Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000, p. 251 (translation modified). On *Cantiga* 209 see F. Prado Vilar, 'Iudeus sacer: Life, Law, and Identity in the 'State of Exception' called 'Marian Miracle,' in H. Kessler and D. Nirenberg (eds.), *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism*, Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, pp. 115-142.

bringing forth of the book, and then returns to witness the miracle of the Virgin's triumph over 'Jewish' science.

Again it proves impossible to separate the 'real' and the 'hermeneutical' or discursive components of the polemic. There were, for example, living Jews among Alfonso's physicians (such as Abraham Ibn Waqar). Perhaps one of them really did prescribe warm compresses to the king. But there was also a discursive context that characterized recourse to physicians as in some way 'Judaizing.' That context is evident not only in the writings of Church Fathers like Jerome or Augustine (writings that circulated widely as parts of the Ordinary Gloss), but also in contemporary theological treatises, confessional manuals, law codes (such as Alfonso's own *Siete partidas*, in which Christians were prohibited from receiving medicines prepared directly by Jewish physicians [7.24.8]), and church councils (and this even in the many regions of late medieval Europe without Jewish physicians), in which recourse to physicians rather than priests when in extremis was condemned as a sin, a mistaken and 'Judaizing' preference for the fleshy over the spiritual physician.³¹

It is surprising that this stigmatization of medicine as 'Jewish' arises in a work patronized by a king who himself patronized so many scientific inquiries, some of them by 'real' Jews. One way to explain this seeming contradiction would be to contain it within the context of the *Cantigas* themselves. The two illuminated volumes we call the Codice Rico and the Codice de Florencia constitute an apologetic program to render the embattled king and his activities in Christological terms. *Cantiga* 235, for example, portrays Alfonso in his final agony as Jesus persecuted unto death by the enmity of his own Jewish people. Just as God's enemies the Jews were punished with eternal misery, so would Alfonso's suffer, for they were also enemies of 'the Son of God,' who would consign them all to eternal fire.

³¹ See e.g. Augustine, *In evangelium Joannis tractatus* (Tractates on the Gospel of John), PL 32, 1443, citing 2 Cor. 2:9: 'Quale remedium posuit Dominus contra aegritudines animae... ut gaudeamus quando videmus hominem in lecto suo constitutum, jactari febribus et doloribus, nec alicubi spem posuisse, nisi ut sibi Evangelium ... non quia ad hoc factum est, sed quia praelatum est Evangelium ligaturis ... ut quiescat dolor ... ad cor non ponitur ut sanetur a peccatis? ... Ponatur ad cor, sanetur cor. Bonum est, bonum, ut de salute corporis non satagas, nisi ut a Deo illam petas ... Rogavit eum Paulus apostolus, ut auferret stimulum carnis ... 'Sufficit tibi gratia mea; nam virtus in infirmitate perficitur'. Of course if the Gospel were literally placed on the body, that could also be interpreted as Judaizing. Jerome, for example, condemns the practice of putting gospel texts on the ill body as equivalent to the Pharisees' use of phylacteries: *Commentaria in Matthaeum*. PL 26, 168 A-C. My thanks to Ryan Giles for relating these texts to the Alfonsine episode.

On the other hand (the song continues) Alfonso, like Jesus, was resurrected by the Virgin into eternal life 'on the happy day of Easter.' She cradled him in her arms just as she had cradled her Son, 'who was nailed on the cross... and Who... bestows his mercy and grace amidst the perils of the world.'

In *Cantiga* 235 Alfonso is a figure of Christ, while his persecutors—that is, his own rebellious Christian subjects—are placed among the murderous Jews. Such polemics suggest that the project of illuminating and compiling the *Cantigas* was animated at least in part by a strategic desire to counter the 'Judaizing' criticisms that marked the last years of Alfonso's reign (including, perhaps, the charge of 'blasphemy'). In fact from their opening pages, the *Cantigas* present both themselves and their royal author as at war with Judaism. Already in *Cantiga* 2, St. Ildefonso stands in for Alfonso both as a Marian author, and as an opponent of Jews and heretics. In *Cantiga* 6, the story of a child murdered by the Jews because he sang so beautifully to the Holy Mary, we may want to see a figuration of the Marian poet (that is, of Alfonso himself) as Christ-like martyr. In *Cantiga* 34 it is painting's turn to be martyred by Judaism. In each of these, the process of creation of the *Cantigas*—poetic, pictorial, musical—is itself presented as a defense of Christianity against Judaism. Indeed *Cantiga* 209 should itself be understood in this vein, as a claim that this song and picture book is not only a Christian object but also a miraculous one, more powerful than any 'Jewish' medicine or science.³²

But we would be wrong to segregate these polemical figurations in the *Cantigas*, for each of these figures of Judaism was embedded in deep discursive currents of Christian and Castilian culture. In other work I have suggested some of the ways in which art and poetry (like 'science') were suspected of misplaced materialism and artifice (which is also to say, of 'Judaism') in some mainstream medieval Christian critical discourses, and tried to show how these figurations affected the development of Christian art. This is not the place to address the potential criticisms that assailed Alfonso's poetic and pictorial project. And of course those criticisms did not always take 'Jewish' form. In *Cantiga* 8, for example, it is a monk who charges the musician with witchcraft, and many *Cantigas* give Muslim or even Satanic form to the enemies of Christian painting. Each of these forms deserves its history. But for my purposes today it is enough if I have convinced you that, in their self-conscious defense of Alfonso's politics, poetry, and art, the *Cantigas* reached deeply into the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim resources of their culture. And one of those resources, illuminated in *Cantiga* 209 by

³² On 'Judaizing' Christian critiques of poetry and of art see D. Nirenberg, 'The Jewishness of Christian Art', in H.L. Kessler and D. Nirenberg (eds.), *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism*, Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, pp. 387-428; id., 'Figures of Thought and Figures of Flesh: 'Jews' and 'Judaism' in Late Medieval Spanish Poetry and Politics', *Speculum* 81 (2006), pp. 398-426.

a painter who might conceivably have himself collaborated with Jews or Muslims in the Alfonsine scriptorium's illustration of scientific manuscripts, was the projection of the dangers of worldly curiosity into a Jewish figure of science.³³

* * *

I do not pretend to have provided anything like an account of the cultural conditions of possibility that more or less simultaneously produced both the proudly self-conscious Alfonsine project of translation, learning and natural-philosophical inquiry on the one hand, and the condemnation of that project—even by Alfonso and his collaborators themselves!—as somehow dangerously ‘un-Christian’ on the other. For that, we would need to pay much more specific attention, not only to the details of the Alfonsine ‘workshop’ and its many participants (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish), but also to each of the multiple genres of the Alfonsine project, embedding each in a cultural history appropriate to it. We would need as well to note how differently the available discourses of critique functioned in different cultural registers, and how these discourses were put to different (often quite new) kinds of work by particular people at particular moments (such as in the episcopal gravamina, in aristocratic resistance to new forms of administration, or during the civil war against the king). That is not a project for an article, nor even for a book, but for a lifetime.

Nevertheless, I do hope to have re-enforced your sense that terms like exchange, autonomy, and repression are insufficient (because too drastically reductive) choices in our attempts to describe the ways in which Christianity, Islam, and Judaism — both real and imagined — were involved in the co-production of whatever it is we mean by Western European culture. A more complex sense of those dynamics seems to me a high priority if we want to understand the cultural history (including the history of science) of the Middle Ages, or for that matter, of our own Modernity.

³³ On the Alfonsine workshop see L. Fernández Fernández, *Arte y Ciencia en el scriptorium de Alfonso X el Sabio*, Puerto de Santa María: Cátedra Alfonso X el Sabio, 2013. The author tells me in a personal communication that at least one illuminator of the Cantigas can be shown to have worked on the scientific manuscripts as well.

Illustrations



Illustration 1: Alfonso receiving the Lapidary. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, MS. h.I.15, fol. 1r. Photo courtesy of Edilán.

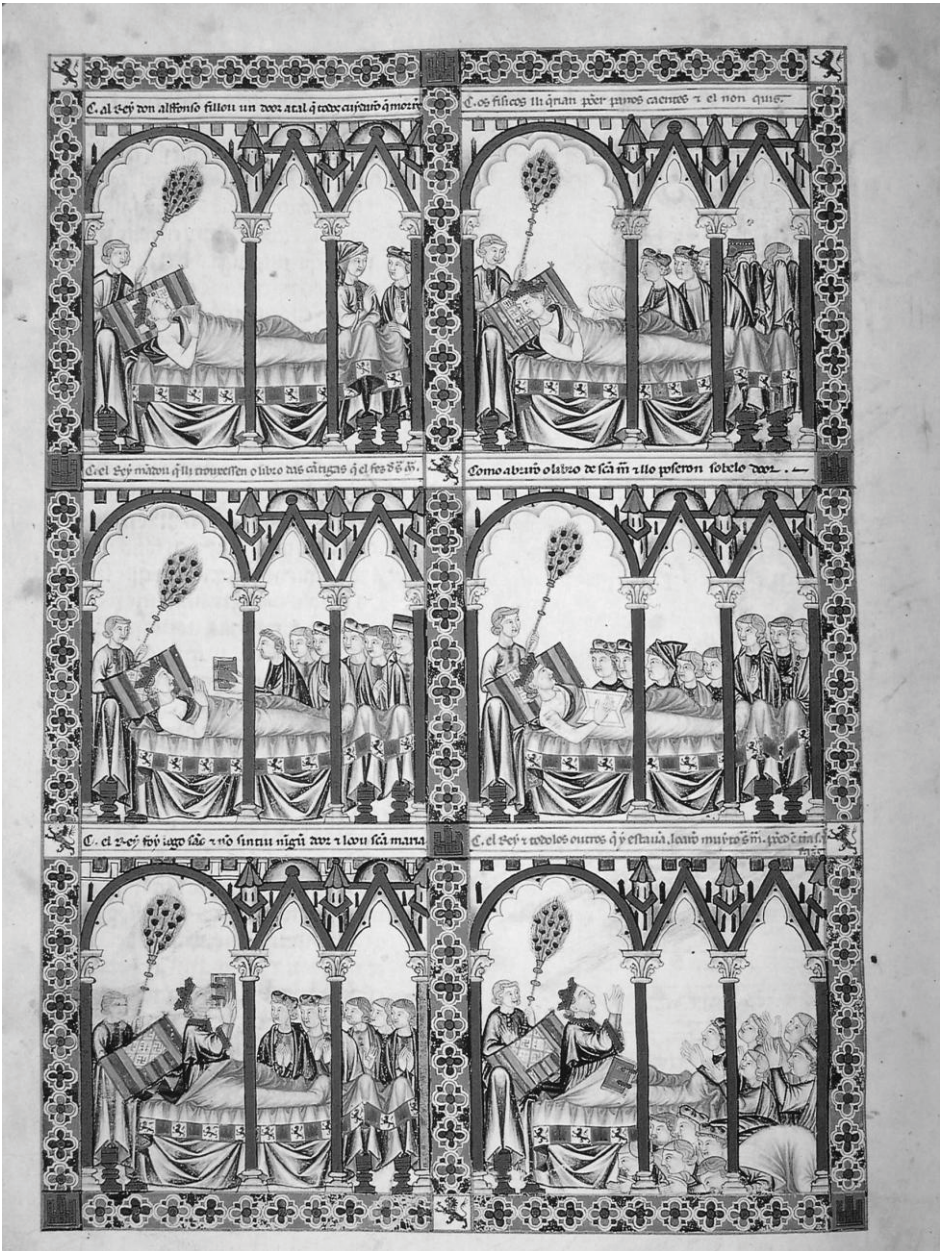


Illustration 2: Cantiga 209, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, MS. Banco Rari 20, fol. 119v. Photo courtesy of Edilán.

Mapping Knowledge

Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages



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