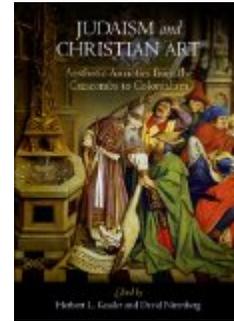


Herbert L. Kessler, David Nirenberg, eds. *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. xii + 441 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4285-0.

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## A Short Art History of Allo-Semitism: Judaism and Christian Art

In his 1997 essay “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern,” Zygmunt Bauman proposed that the term “allosemitism” should replace “anti-semitism” as an explanatory category for representations of Jews and Judaism. Bauman emphasized three qualities of allosemitism that are relevant to the book under review here. First, rather than constituting straightforward enmity, allosemitism is a “radically *ambivalent* attitude,” and thus the basis of philo- as well as anti-semitism. Second, allosemitism is a form not of heterophobia but rather of proteophobia, meaning a fear and horror of that which defies clean-cut categories. Third, historically Judeophobia was never “cut from one block.” Pursuing his interest in social categories, Bauman proposed that “the Jews served as the wasteyard onto which all the ambivalence squeezed out of the universe could be dumped, so that the self-identity of the Christian world could be of one block and at peace with itself.”[1]

Without explicitly invoking Bauman, *Judaism and Christian Art* is an implicit response to Bauman’s challenge. The essays provide some sobering examples of othering. But they go beyond that, and also make numerous methodological interventions. So the collection promises more than straightforward iconographic cataloguing. The book continues and extends the work of collections that have been published since the 1990s.

The book has thirteen essay chapters. This review will discuss just a few of the chapters, and some link-

ages that imbue individual chapters with added richness, but that is not to detract from the others: without exception, all the essays are insightful and stimulating, sometimes provocatively so. The essays are linked by multiple thematic connections. Certain aspects of the late medieval Christian cult emerge as loci for the projection of Jewishness in order to “squeeze out ambivalence.” For example, and unsurprisingly, after the late medieval institution of the feast Corpus Christi (the cultic veneration of the Eucharist) (Francisco Prado-Vilar and Achim Timmermann), and with renewed virulence during the Renaissance (Mitchell B. Merback), Reformation, and Counterreformation, the theme of Corpus Christi emerges as a central place of allosemitic projection. Similarly, the theme of Mary/Ecclesia (versus Synagoga) and baptism versus circumcision (Marcia Kupfer) emerge as focal points for the construction not only of a Christian self-identity but also of an Orthodox and later a Catholic self-identity. The volume’s editors contribute synthetic essays that, while presenting a case study, also respond to all the other contributions.

The introduction makes clear that research into the representation of Jews and Judaism constitutes “not merely minority questions” but “also critical questions about the nature of Christianity and of art.” The collection’s proposition is that “in all the Christian cultures explored in this book ... art defined and legitimated itself by rearticulating and representing its relationship to ‘Judaism,’ and thereby discovered the conditions of possibil-

ity for its own existence” (p. 2).

Jas Elsner’s essay about the late Roman Exodus sarcophagi, the only essay in the volume devoted to late antiquity, shows how the appropriation of quintessential tropes of Roman history functions to recast the Christian Romans as the new Israelites. For those familiar with Elsner’s work on the transition between polytheistic and Christian Roman art (*Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* [2007]), the essay goes one step further in emphasizing how the Crossing of the Red Sea theme “is consistently and creatively appropriated for a range of Christian exegetic meanings,” and cannot be reduced to a single, authoritative Christian meaning (p. 33). Judaism thus becomes “a kind of empty figure into which and around which a series of entirely Christian meanings must inevitably resonate” (p. 38).

Herbert Kessler’s piece “Shaded with Dust” condenses the author’s longstanding interest in medieval ideologies of vision. Judaism represents “the cohort of the ‘eye of the body’ on the battlefield of Christian art, continuously engaged in combat with the Christian troops of the ‘eye of the heart’ ” (p. 75).

Prado-Vilar’s essay is a sequel to his own earlier “Gothic Anamorphic Gaze” (2004) and “Sombras en el Palacio de las Horas” (2009).[2] Together with “*Judeus sacer*,” his contribution to this collection, the three essays revolutionize current approaches to the imagery of the Other in Alfonsine culture. This shift entails a move away from the iconographic pattern established in the 1980s and toward an ambitious deployment of current political and cultural theory, partly based on the cultural “migration” of psychoanalytical concepts. Prado-Vilar proposes a novel category, the *Judeus Sacer*. He mobilizes the political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben around the *Homo Sacer*, a legal category created by the power inherent in sovereignty to declare a state of exception (Ausnahmezustand), and consequently to strip a person of legal protection. “Sacer” here retains its double meaning of sacred—in the sense of set apart—and accursed, and is thus a badge of an ambiguity that is both hopeful and dangerous. Prado-Vilar recognizes the medieval antecedent of the state of exception in the Marian miracle, which precipitates its Jewish subject into a no-man’s land outside the Jewish community and readies it for conversion. The figure of the *Judeus sacer* enables Prado-Vilar to escape from the established iconographic nomenclature of the known anti-Jewish (and anti-Muslim) stereotypes, and to see the uncategorizable figure of the Jewish personal doctor Abraham ibn Waqar as witness of the Marian miracle.

This figure is precisely not stereotyped, not wholly Other, but rather *extimate*—paradoxically intimately—Other.

The contributions by Kupfer and Felipe Pereda, both on fifteenth-century Castile, complement each other. The Biblia de Alba is a unique monument of translation. In 1422, the grand master of the military order of Calatrava commissioned this Castilian translation of the Hebrew Bible from Rabbi Moses de Arragel. The ground for contention arose from the patron’s requirement to include glosses and illustrations. And the Jewish translator was coerced into a collaboration with mendicant censors, as well as collusion with a pictorial program at odds with Jewish cultural sensibilities. Kupfer’s interpretation of one illumination, “Abraham circumcises himself” (Genesis 17), is the only attempt in the volume to explore the possibility of Jewish agency. Kupfer draws on James C. Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcripts” subversive of the “official transcript,” i.e., the undermining, by the powerless, of representations controlled by those in power. Kupfer then builds on Sonia Fellous’s work on the hybrid (Christian and Jewish) nature of this Bible project to identify Jewish resistance (only partially successful) against coercion and censorship. She argues that Arragel sought to introduce a hidden oppositional or subversive discourse not only into his Castilian Bible translation and glosses, but also, by means of verbal directives, into the illuminations. Whether or not Arragel really expected potential Jewish readers to be sufficiently familiar with the Zohar and Midrashim, Kupfer’s proposal—that the hidden transcript pits the salvific power of circumcision blood against the official transcript’s triumph of Christ’s passion’s blood—is a perfectly plausible one. Only, it seems (as Kupfer documents) that no Jewish readers, or for that matter Christian readers outside the very specialized inquisitorial circles, ever got to see this monument of covert subversion.

Pereda’s essay, on devotional images that are both naturalizing and archaizing, opens up a startling vista onto the Castilian visual culture in the time of mass conversion and Inquisition. Pereda’s research shows how the discourse surrounding icons and religious images was connected to the onslaught on the conversos. Conversos remained suspect, whether they refused to own religious images or whether they owned them; in the latter case they became vulnerable to the fake accusations of image desecration. Images became an “inevitable source of conflict” and of exclusion (p. 274). Pereda’s social history of late fifteenth-century Castilian (especially Sevillian) religious images makes clear that neither a stylistic history nor an iconographic history will do—we must

rather attend to the practice of piety that centered around images as well as aesthetic theories. We are exceptionally lucky that the beginnings of the anti-converso Inquisition have left a rich reservoir of polemical texts. What Pereda shows with startling clarity is that it was in a way the “converso problem” that made late medieval and Renaissance Castilian religious art what it was.

The essays by Timmermann and Merback form a kind of diptych on the theme of Eucharistic obsessions in Renaissance south Germany. Timmermann’s piece continues his previous work on the anti-Jewish potential of the Living Cross. Here, he builds on the recent redating of the Landshut Living Cross tympanum to 1452 to read it as a memorial of the 1450 expulsion of the Landshut Jews. It is a pity that he does not discuss more deeply the explicit labeling of the Synagoga figure as “Frau Venus.” A conflation between a blind Synagoga and a blind Frau Venus is possible, but it needs to be argued in more detail. A double substitution operated in the Landshut Living Cross—Ecclesia is replaced by a cleric celebrating Mass, and Synagoga by a blind yet crowned Frau Venus (Synagoga’s crown should be falling, not firmly lodged on her head). But does this double substitution really need to be connected so directly to the expulsion it allegedly commemorates? Despite my interest in medieval anti-Judaism, I was left wondering whether the blind crowned figure (remember “Blind Amor”?) might not be just Frau Venus after all, and whether the polemic set up in the tympanum might be about south German politics and theology in the aftermath of the Hussite wars—in other words, an internal Christian polemic.

Staying with the Eucharistic imagery, Merback engagingly brings us near to a truly extraordinary fragment of an anonymous Holy Sacrament triptych (south German, ca. 1510). Despite some disputable detail interpretations, such as the speculative identification of the towel with a tallith or the somewhat reckless characterization of the Bilderbogen wall picture of the Brazen Serpent as a “Jewish-Christian mezuzah,” Merback’s anthropological reading of the altar as an apotropaic picture warding off the fear of unworthy consumption of the Eucharist is extremely fruitful. It goes beyond the customary iconographic readings, and shows that these “anti-Jewish” images of the Last Supper and its Old Testament antitypes, such as the Passover meal, were in reality about Eucharistic anxieties around the substance that became transubstantiated. As the Landshut inscription had stated (see Timmermann again), “the [Eucharistic] sacrifice brings life [eternal] to the pious, death to the evil ones.” And Merback concurs, on the basis of late medieval Francis-

can theorists of the Eucharist: “Idolatrous Israelite feasting becomes an allegory and a type for the ‘carnal feeding’ Alexander of Hales contrasted with the ‘sacramental eating’ properly reserved for the Eucharist” (p. 217).

The theme of the figurality of the Old Testament is further pursued in Richard Neer’s “Poussin’s Useless Treasures.” In relation to Nicolas Poussin’s two versions of the Sacrament of Penance, he demonstrates that “untrammelled by facts, the French imagination was free to make of Judaism what it wished. In particular, it used Judaism as a way to think figurality and literalism.... The Old Testament was in Augustine’s phrase, ‘a promise in figure’” (p. 335). In several of the Poussin and Poussin-school paintings discussed, Hebrew letters (either real or fake) play an important role. But this role is complex, especially in cases where the Hebrew is illegible. Thus “Hebrew becomes a way to think history painting’s grounding in laws of space, time, and legibility, laws that Poussin states precisely in order to transcend them in his figural juxtapositions” (p. 352).

In this essay and in Ralph Ubl’s piece “Eugene Delacroix’s Jewish Wedding and the Medium of Painting,” the authors are concerned with the early modern and modern theories of painting more than with religious questions. Especially in Ubl’s essay, the boundaries of Christian art are really transcended, since Delacroix’s art did not glorify the Incarnate Logos. Given that his art is post-Christian, the import of the subject matter chosen, the Jewish wedding, rightly receives considerable attention from Ubl, who argues that the choice of subject is not coincidental, not merely yet another instance of the romantic orientalizing of Jewish subject matter. Delacroix’s painting constitutes more than a practical demonstration of his theory of oscillating, imagination-fueling painting, and a secularized reworking of an Old Master’s model, Paolo Veronese’s “Wedding at Cana” (1563). It is also a genuine monument to Delacroix’s relationship with the Jewish mediators—namely, the interpreters Abraham Benchimol and David Azoncot, and above all the female members of their families, whom Delacroix was allowed to paint freely—who made his Moroccan journey what it was. He had to “rely on the hospitality of the Jews and challenge the jealousy of the Muslims,” which made access to Muslim women subjects fraught with difficulty (p. 367).

The concluding essay, by David Nirenberg, is a real tour de force, and might best be read as part of the introduction, as it provides an even more extensive framework for the entire volume. The sweeping range of this

synthetic essay is very impressive: in effect, Nirenberg, a historian, delineates a model for seeing the entire history of Western art and of its theorization in terms of Judaism as a trope for the aesthetic struggle. He has undertaken to reread the history of Western aesthetics, often in a range of original languages nowadays mastered by few scholars. The bipolar or ambivalent nature of tropes of Judaism (at once too material and too abstract, too literal and too artificial) is reminiscent of the work of Kalman Bland and Margaret Olin. Nirenberg has conjured a truly provocative rereading of Western aesthetic texts.

The volume as a whole is remarkable for its thematic cohesiveness, something not often achieved by conference proceedings. In particular, it engages questions of literal and spiritual viewing, the status of materiality in Christian art, and the role of incarnational and Eucharistic theories for medieval and Renaissance conceptions of the image. It works and reworks these topics from different perspectives, and with different case studies. Still, the title raises a question: in what sense is “Western art”—all of Western art—Christian? Is modern Western art in fact post-Christian, or does there come a point at which the proposition “all significant concepts of the modern theory of [art] are secularised theological concepts” is simply no longer relevant (p. 408)? When Peter Paul Rubens’s followers warred with Poussin’s followers during the seventeenth century, can their debate over the primacy of *disegno* over color be reduced to one about “Judaism,” even as a trope? Although Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel undoubtedly associated certain qualities in art with biblical Judaism, what is the exact

relationship of such a construct, drawn from the Enlightenment critique of religion, to the origins of nationalist art-historical writing around the mid-1800s? To end this temporal journey with the Entartete Kunst exhibition, as the volume does in effect, rather than, say, with Clement Greenberg or the artists featured in the 1996 exhibition *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, is to look away from the challenge of art after abstraction—and global contemporary arts. But in fairness, to take up that challenge would be a different project.

The strength of this book lies precisely in its dedicated focus on the medieval and early modern periods, where it opens one’s eyes to the presence of *difference* at the center of Christian Europe. The essays in this book jointly represent a valuable contribution to the disciplinary debates across art history, medieval and early modern cultural studies and histories, Jewish studies, theology, and religious studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern,” in *Modernity, Culture, and “the Jew,”* ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 148.

[2]. Francisco Prado-Vilar, “Gothic Anamorphic Gaze,” in *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, ed. Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005), 67-100; and Francisco Prado-Vilar, “Sombras en el Palacio de las Horas,” in *Alfonso X el Sabio*, ed. I. G. Bango Torviso (Murcia: CAM, 2009), 448-455.

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