INTRODUCTION

"MY COMMUNITY WILL BE DIVIDED": HERESY IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

The Prophet Muhammad once predicted that as "the Jews are divided into seventy-one sects [and] the Christians into seventy-two, my community will be divided into seventy-three sects."[1]

Give or take a few sects, Muhammad's prophecy was correct. The three major religions of the Middle Ages had many things in common: All balanced sacred texts with commentary and interpretation that sought to translate lessons composed in a particular time with the always-moving pace of history. All had competing systems of religious leadership and authority confronted with vibrant, dynamic, lived religion. Christians, Muslims, and Jews were all somewhere, at some point, a religious minority. And all experienced the conflicting pulls of unity and diversity of which heresy was both by-product and accelerant. Diversity and difference, as Muhammad alluded, was only to be expected. The problem was that of *unacceptable* difference.[2]

This book is a comparative history of heresy, and of responses to it, in the three major religions of the Middle Ages. In scholarship, "medieval heresy" usually connotes the Latin Christian heresy of Europe. Judaism, Islam, and even Greek Christianity – estranged from its Latin sibling by language, culture, and custom long before their schism in 1054 – have tended to fall out of the story, in part because of the

[1] Al-Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitab al-Milal wa 'l-Nihal*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul, 1984), 9–10.

[2] I owe this phrase to Ed Peters.

inherent challenges involved in comparative history. Language, mentality, and circumstances differ, and even the most obvious similarities need to be understood in context, or can mislead. We'll describe below how this book will try to overcome those challenges. But the value of attempting our comparative history outweighs its risks. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have never been hermetically sealed religions, and recent scholarship has emphasized their contact, exchange, and coexistence on the ground in the Middle Ages. Acknowledging the frequency and depth of that interreligious contact has two chief consequences for the history of medieval heresy. First, ideas of heresy within each religion were closely related to ideas of their religiously different neighbors, rivals, subjects, or rulers. Second, and more importantly, by widening our scope to Judaism, Islam, and Greek Christianity, we can try to capture and to define a truly medieval heresy, telling us both about the period, and about these religions that transcend it.

The history of heresy is a matter of finding the tipping points, the situations and moments, at which acceptable religious differences became unacceptable – particularly to someone who had the power to do something about it. This book's search for those tipping points among Jews, Christians, and Muslims will progress chronologically, beginning in the 380s, a decade that saw both the first anti-heretical legislation of Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius I, and the first execution of a Christian heretic. It ends in the opening decade of the 1500s, after a fusion of heresy, race, and religious identity in the kingdom of Spain that established Muslim and Jewish converts to Christianity as strange, new kinds of heretics. Geographically, our view spans from western Europe to the eastern reaches of the Muslim world, mapping a global context of medieval heresy.

TRULY MEDIEVAL HERESIES

The pursuit of a thoroughly medieval heresy requires some breakdown of how we think about and describe "medieval heresy." First is the "medieval," which doesn't sit perfectly upon Judaism and Islam. Both have different dating systems than Christianity's Gregorian calendar and *anno domini* year numeration, itself an early-medieval invention. Jews began their year reckoning from the creation of the world (dated to about 3700 years before the beginning of the Christian calendar), and the Muslim calendar starts its numeration with Muhammad's flight to Medina (the *hijra*) in AD 622. (For tidiness,

this book will use only the Gregorian year dating customary in scholarship on medieval Europe.) More substantively, one might object that Muslims and Jews experienced different historical contexts and development from the Christians who formed the dating conventionally used in the modern West. The Islamicist Jonathan Berkey, for example, has remarked that "Middle Ages" is too attached to European history, and has proposed instead the phrase "Middle Period" to describe Islam between 1000 and 1500.[3]

We are already shaving off some rough edges by using the terms "Islam," "Judaism," and "Christianity." Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a theorist of religion, famously complained that "isms" were a modern invention, hindering more than they helped by suggesting greater coherence and uniformity among believers than existed in reality. (There is also an enormous scholarly discussion about meanings of "religion," with which this book won't engage.) But some "ism"-ing here can't be helped. Christians, Muslims, and Jews were firmly bounded, recognized legal categories in the Middle Ages, imposed by ruling authorities. Medieval law treating conversion and apostasy recognized that to be Jewish, Christian, and Muslim were identities that, while changeable, had body and meaning. Each group also had internal criteria for belonging, such as baptism, lineage, or confession of faith. Using these terms, as we will here, shouldn't mask that each religion was in many ways in flux, unsettled, with diversity and variation in practice and belief. That very dynamism provided those tipping points so instrumental in discussions of heresy.

Regardless of genuine differences, and with awareness of the risks, specialists in both Judaism and Islam commonly use "medieval" and "Middle Ages" in their work. This is not just a matter of convenience. We might point out that "medieval" has no real purchase for Christianity or for Europe, either. Originating with the Italian poet and humanist Petrarch (1304–74), the notion of a European "middle age" – between the glories of the Greco-Roman classical past and the Italian Renaissance that had retrieved them – was a self-conscious and arbitrary construct. Intended to disparage crude "Germanic" centuries that had lost a Mediterranean intellectual and cultural legacy, "medieval" is even less applicable to the Greek Christianity of Byzantium, the

[3] J. P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 179.

political continuation of the Roman Empire. "Medieval" has no natural, inherent meaning and fit for Christianity.

Even if it did, refusing to associate "medieval" with Judaism and Islam knocks us up unpleasantly against the three religions' contact, conflict, and coexistence in this period. Were Latin Christians living in tenth-century al-Andalus medieval, but their Jewish neighbors and Muslim rulers not? What of tenth-century Sicily, where Greek Christians were ruled by Muslims? Were the Jewish communities of twelfth-century Christian France medieval, while their co-religionists in twelfth-century Muslim Egypt weren't? And so on. Refusing to use "medieval" means an insularity and purity in studying Jewish and Islamic experience that a comparative history like this simply can't maintain. No matter what year-number and periodization we assign to contact among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, most important is its reality, frequency, and complexity. "Medieval" and "Middle Ages" in this book simply describe common centuries, from the late fourth to the early sixteenth, without implying qualities that are proper to Latin Christianity.

That said, these centuries did have some distinctive, shared characteristics that recommend them as a setting to study heresy comparatively. First, this period was marked by relationships of religion and state distinct from what preceded and followed it. Latin Christians formed a theory of "two swords," one spiritual and one secular, working in concert. Greek Christians saw in the Byzantine Emperor a guardian of orthodoxy; he was a direct link to the great protectors of the church in the Roman Empire, like Constantine the Great, who legalized Christianity, and Theodosius, who made it the empire's official religion. Islam, unlike Judaism or Christianity, was openly defined as both *din wa dawla* ("religion and state"). Its ideal was the unity of the religious and the political, with the caliph, Muhammad's successor, the head of a Muslim community that was both a state polity and a community of faith. This ideal was rent in the early days of Islam, and by the tenth century caliphs had been forced to focus on a chiefly political authority. Nevertheless, rulers of Muslim polities throughout the medieval period sought to appear and to act as defenders of faith, negotiating these roles with the religious elite, known as the *ulama*. Medieval Jews, stateless during these centuries, could be led by *nesiim* and exilarchs who contested with rabbis for leadership. Jewish religious life was, if indirectly, supervised and governed by their Christian and Muslim rulers.

Second, and relatedly, in this period the notion of "heresy" invented by early Christians – who had themselves inherited and translated ideas about religious rightness from Jews and Roman pagans – first transformed it into something to be persecuted, usually by an alliance of secular and religious authorities. That persecution, moreover, wasn't accidental, secret, or apologized for. Instead, these centuries were marked by Jews, Muslims, and Christians who found, in their traditions and theologies, justifications for identifying and punishing persons who believed wrongly. As we'll consider further below, the most influential recent scholarly picture of Latin Christian medieval Europe has been of a society that, at a particular moment and for particular reasons, began to create and to persecute outsiders. (Some would argue it has never stopped.) Heresy is an important part of that story, and not just because heretics, together with Jews and Muslims, were marginalized and persecuted outsiders.

In addition, this "othering" process that scholars, most notably R. I. Moore, have described for high-medieval Latin Europe was echoed in how Greek Christians, Muslims, and Jews themselves wrote about and dealt with heresy. We can even say that Greek Christians and Muslims *preceded* high-medieval Latins in the persecution of heresy. Finally, that persecuting process, which associated heretics and religious others as dangerous outsiders, had an important predecessor. It was linked to a shared habit – with a heritage reaching back to antiquity – of blaming heresy on contact with other faiths. Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike looked at their heretics and saw chiefly each other's bad influence. As Marina Rustow observes, "ideas about heresy ... often bear the signs of having been formulated in dialogue with other religions."[4] This meant both collective blame, and also a mutual influence in defining and understanding heresy. This book attends to interreligious relations (sometimes even where heretics seem absent) because those were so important, in various ways, to the history of medieval heresy.

These centuries, customarily if imperfectly called "medieval," were a time in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims had particular notions of the individual, the collective, and the state; of religious commitment and cohesion; and a dangerous sensitivity to the risks of freedom and to the virtues of intolerance.

Now, something much more difficult to define: "heresy."

[4] M. Rustow, "Karaites Real and Imagined: Three Cases of Jewish Heresy," *Past and Present* 197 (2007), 38.

WHAT IS HERESY?

The place to start in describing medieval heresy is the words people in the Middle Ages themselves used to do so. In modern English, there are many ways to describe diversity of belief within a religion, from plain differences to error to formal separation – words like sect, schism, heterodoxy, nonconformity, apostasy, blasphemy, and religious dissent help to reflect that spectrum. Historians of medieval heresy must be attuned to questions of language and translation in how that diversity of belief was conveyed in the Middle Ages. For this book, that means Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. What in our medieval texts is translated as "heresy?"

Latin, the elite language of Christian western Europe, adopted its *heresis* from the Greek *hairesis* or "choice," and we'll discuss below how early Christians transformed what was originally a neutral term into a condemning one. In train followed the figure of the heretic (*hereticus*) and the *heresiarcha*, or leader of a heresy; both words were likewise adopted from Greek. So too was schism (*schisma*), meaning split or separation. Medieval Latin and Greek shared a common vocabulary of heresy and schism, one that presupposed Christian belonging and unity. Likewise, the Latin *secta* (sect) derived from the Latin *seco*, to cut off, or to divide, which eventually developed into "school" and "faction." Christianity's first centuries required some working-out of the differences among "heresy," "schism," or "sect," which were not always clear. The apostle Paul's remark that "It is fitting that there be heresies" among Christians, for example, responded to a report that the church in Corinth had broken into schism (1 Cor 18:19). Some of this distinguishing was theological – was a heresy a matter of belief, and schism of practice? Did rejecting a lawful bishop make one a schismatic or a heretic? Did an unresolved schism eventually mutate into heresy? By the time of Iberian bishop Isidore of Seville (*c.* 560–636), heresy, sect, and schism were differentiated, if a bit roughly: to Isidore, schismatics differed in opinion, but not in practice; sects for Isidore meant holding a particular premise also associated with belief.[5] Perhaps reflecting the sorting-out in which "heresy" developed darker connotations than "schism" or "sect," the Latin Vulgate Bible in the fifth century translated as *secta*

[5] Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. S. A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and O. Berghof (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8.3.1–2, 174.

the Greek New Testament's reference to the earliest Christian community as "the *hairesis* of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5).

Medieval Jewish communities that used Hebrew likewise had a diversity of terms for religious nonconformity and belief defined as errant. Most of these were the legacy of rabbinic literature, specifically the Mishnah and the Talmud's discussions of wrong belief. Later commentaries kept discussion of this terminology alive. The most common Hebrew word translated by modern scholars as "heresy" is *minut*, with the related *min*, "heretic" (pl. *minim*). *Min* strictly meant an idolater or polytheist, and consequently the term could apply in medieval sources to a Christian, although it most often referred to the Karaites, strict scripturalists whom we will meet in Chapter 2. We also see *kofer* (denier, unbeliever), and the related *kofer ba-iqqar* (someone who denied the basics of the faith) and *kofer ba-Torah* (a denier of the Torah, which could also apply to Karaites). *Apikoros* derived from "Epicurean," and the Talmud defined it as a freethinker disrespectful to Torah scholars. According to the great Talmudic scholar Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105), an *apikoros* was a person who distorted the meaning of the Torah.[6] On the other hand, Jewish communities in the medieval Muslim world generally wrote and spoke in Arabic rather than in Hebrew, using the terminology below. Arabic-speaking Jews even adopted *madhhab* – the word for Islamic legal schools – to describe both the heretical Karaites and the mainstream Rabbanites.

Specialists in medieval Islam have often translated the Arabic *zandaqa* as "heresy" (hence *zindiq*, "heretic," and *zanadiqa*, "heretics"). *Zandaqa* is a loan-word from Persian, originally signifying various forms of dualism, most especially Manicheism. It was later expanded and generalized to denote "heresy" in the sense of insupportable wrong belief, with a hint of opposition to order and to state, as well as theological nonconformity. Key in *zandaqa* was the notion of secrecy, a disparity between outer faithfulness to Islam and inner, wrong belief. Rather than open and public apostasy, it was a kind of apostasy more dangerous because it was concealed. Other Arabic words are also sometimes translated by modern scholars as "heresy,"

[6] A. Steinsaltz (ed.), *The Talmud [= Talmud Bavli]: The Steinsaltz Edition,* vol. XXI, *Tractate Sanhedrin, pt. 7* (New York: Random House, 1989), 99b, 38–9; J. Davis, "Drawing the Line: Views of Jewish Heresy and Belief among Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenazic Jews," in D. Frank and M. Goldish (eds.), *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 163.

or help us to access sensibilities about errant belief and practice in medieval Islam. These include deviation (*ilhad*, with the related *mulhid*, "deviator"); apostasy (*ridda*); innovation (*bid'a*; the opposite of *sunna* or tradition); unbelief (*kufr*); and sect (*firkah*, strictly "division"). Another Arabic word sometimes applied in medieval sources to errant belief, *ghuluww* – meaning exceeding limits or going too far – gets us precisely to that idea of a tipping point at which acceptable difference becomes unacceptable. At the same time, medieval Arabic also had terminology for orthodoxy and purity of belief.

These are the basics of language. It is a much greater challenge to understand how medieval people conceptualized the words they used. What is heresy, historically, and can we apply this idea born in Christianity to Judaism and Islam?

Hairesis *and heresy*

In medieval Latin Christianity, "heresy" meant a baptized Christian's stubborn adherence to errant belief even after being told that the belief was errant. (Jews and Muslims were not then technically heretics, although this was not always so simple.) Believing wrongly, but not *knowing* one's belief was wrong, was not heresy. Disobedience, pride, and stubbornness were then inherent in the definition of heresy, and in this sense heresy was relational, impossible without a person or group who assumed the authority to instruct. Isidore of Seville hearkened back to the strict meaning of the Greek *hairesis* as "choice" in his definition of heresy, while giving it a distinctly medieval flavor:

> Heresy is so called in Greek from "choice," doubtless because each person chooses for himself that which seems best to him, as did the Peripatetic, Academic, Epicurean, and Stoic philosophers – or just as others who, devising perverse teachings, have withdrawn from the Church by their own will. Hence, therefore, "heresy," named with a Greek word, takes its meaning from "choice," by which each person, according to his own judgment, chooses for himself whatever he pleases to institute and adopt. But we are permitted to introduce nothing based on our own judgment, nor to choose what someone else has introduced from his own judgment.[7]

Heresy was selfish individual choice, opposed to selfless obedience to common consensus deriving from apostolic authority, and to spiritual

[7] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 8.3.1–2, 174. Isidore's definition echoed that of Jerome; see Chapter 1.

superiors. By 1184, at the dawn of ecclesiastical inquisitions into suspected heresy, Pope Lucius III (r. 1181–5) in *Ad abolendam* would describe heretics as "all who presume to think, or to teach . . . otherwise than as the Holy Roman Church teaches and observes."[8] Perhaps the best-known, and often quoted, definition of "heresy" in medieval Europe belonged to English theologian and bishop Robert Grosseteste (*c.* 1170–1253), to whom it was "an opinion chosen by human sense, contrary to Holy Scripture, taught openly, defended pertinaciously."[9] The kernel of "choice" remained, but it was here cast negatively, wrapped up with stubbornness, selfishness, and a lack of humility. Both ecclesiastical and secular law in the Middle Ages defined heresy as a consciously chosen sin and crime.

The original connotation of the Greek *hairesis* in antiquity, however, was neutral. The religious world of the first-century Roman Empire, in which Christianity arose, was indeed one of choice. Complementing the state's official polytheistic cult was a vibrant variety of mystery cults, household gods, and private devotions, all of which offered a colorful palette for personal piety. Rome generally welcomed and incorporated the foreign gods and practices encountered in its geographical spread and conquest throughout the Latin West and the Greek East. Monotheistic Jews, chiefly resident in the Roman province of Judea on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, were tolerated, and despite having a centralized worship focus at the Second Temple in Jerusalem, were themselves diverse. As the Jewish historian Josephus (*c.* 38–*c.* 100) famously chronicled, Judaism had thriving and contentious sects – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes. These were distinguished in part by their varying opinions on Jews' acceptable cooperation with the subjugating Romans, and relatedly on the nature and role of the promised messiah. The Greek word Josephus used to describe these groups was *haereseos*, reflecting customary use of "heresy" to connote a seeking person's choice among rival pagan philosophies that offered different ways of life.[10] As late as the seventh century, as we saw above, Isidore of Seville recalled precisely this

[8] E. Peters (ed.), *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 171.

[9] Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. H. R. Luard (London: Rolls Series, 1880; repr. Wiesbaden: Kraus, 1964), vol. v, 400–2 (my translation).

[10] Josephus, *The Jewish War, Books I–III*, ed. and trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), 2.119–66, 368–87; for *hairesis*, see 368, 374, 384.

meaning. The neutrality of *hairesis* in antiquity is – a bit ironically – well illustrated by the New Testament. Most of the appearances of *hairesis* are in the book of Acts, which depicts the early Christians' ministry in a religiously lively and pluralist Roman Empire, with its diverse paganism, Judaism, and philosophical schools. We alluded above to one of these biblical references, to the early Christians as the "heresy" of the Nazarenes.

A neutral *hairesis* became the culpable and condemned heresy, in the sense commonly understood today, in the first two centuries of Christianity. The germ of medieval heresy is the stern insistence upon unity, harmony, concord, and adherence to a delimited message that saturates Christianity's earliest texts. Letters written by the apostle Paul in the 50s and early 60s AD to guide some of the first "churches" in the Roman Empire's cities insisted on a single, authoritative truth. "Even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you," Paul warned the church in Galatia, "let that one be accursed!" (Gal 1:8) An anonymous short guide to practice and ethics known as the *Didache* (written between 50 and 100), and letters from esteemed bishops Clement of Rome (*c.* 96), Ignatius of Antioch (*c.* 35–*c.* 107), and Polycarp of Smyrna (*c.* 69–*c.* 155) were, like Paul's letters, copied and circulated among Christian communities. All prescribed humble obedience to bishops, the leaders of those communities, as guarantors of unity and protectors of that truth. For example, Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the church in Trallia exhorted it to be nourished on Christian food, by obeying bishops and ignoring preaching that neglected Christ. The Trallians could then avoid "the alien herbs of heresy," which Ignatius linked to poison and corruption.[11]

By the second century, Paul's fear of "pseudo-apostles" who taught error and weakened communities had evolved. Now several views in the nascent, and itself diverse, Christian movement were systematically attacked in polemical writings as contrary to the truth, to tradition, and to consensus – contrary to what were, in reality, still-unsettled and contested norms of doctrine and practice. Their detractors presented these "choices" not as value-free alternatives, but instead as flatly wrong violations of an absolute divine truth. And

[11] Ignatius, "Epistle to the Trallians," 6.1, in A. Louth (ed.) and M. Staniforth (trans.), *Early Christian Writings*, rev. edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1987), 80.