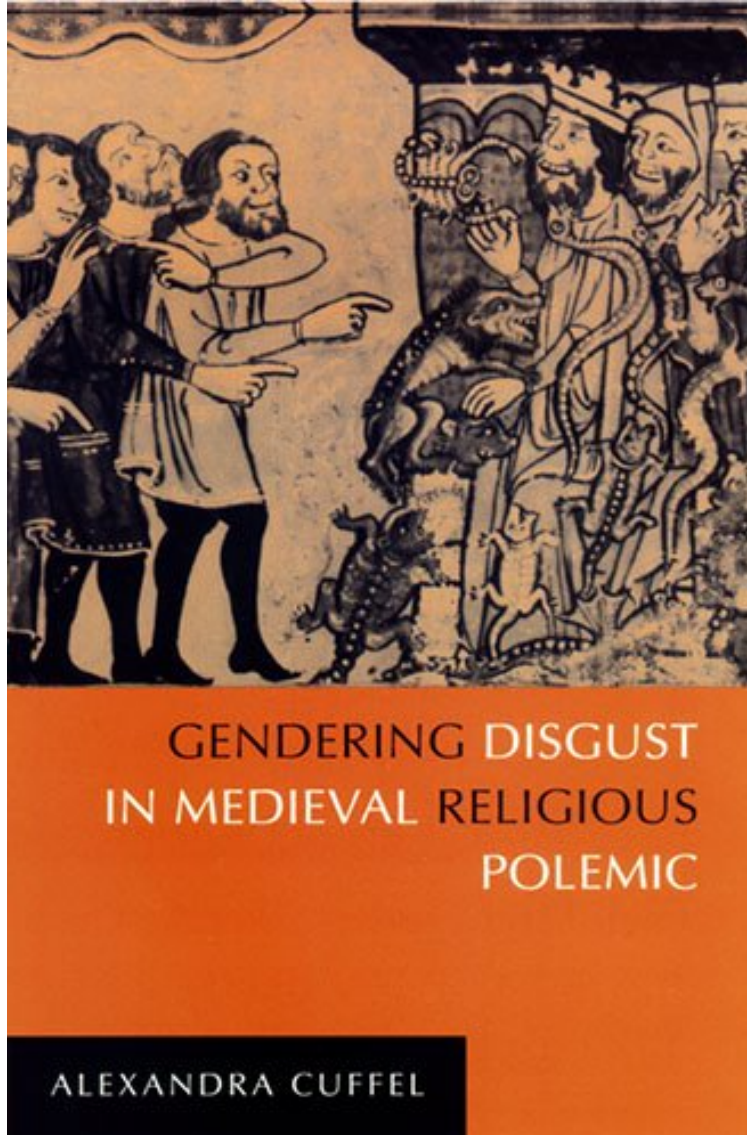


(Free and download) Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic

## Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic

*Alexandra Cuffel*

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**Alexandra Cuffel : Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic By Mithridates VI of Pontus Alexandra Cuffel's Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic explores the conceptions of bodily filth and ritual pollution, especially regarding the female body, in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts. Chronologically her study stretches from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, focusing on the twelfth and thirteenth

centuries. Cuffel's primary argument is that a group of shared beliefs and values about the body existed among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and, early on, Greco-Roman Pagans, and that they used similar tactics to degrade the "other". By evoking impurity and bodily filth these religions created "theological and emotional obstacles between themselves and those with whom they disagreed" (47). Often, Christians and Muslims used this imagery to convince their followers to join in holy war. The Jews, a minority religion, used similar tactics that often endangered themselves and their entire local community, yet still demonstrated their own superiority. This study, in part, seeks to answer the basic questions concerning the "function of polemic in each group" (5). Despite addressing the broader conceptions of disease and ritual cleanliness, Cuffel never strays far from her central focus, the perceptions of the female body, especially of the womb and menstrual blood. She seeks to understand why women's bodies, more than men's, were associated with "dirt, waste, and rot" thus constructing "'female' as a negative ontological category in relation to the spiritual world" (26). *Gendering Disgust* is divided into two parts. Part I begins by briefly establishing the Greek and Roman groundwork regarding the human body, shaped by Pliny and Aristotle, and then traces these developments in Late Antiquity. She addresses the influential Galenic and Aristotelian medical schema that "automatically distances women from the divine" (27) and argues that late antiquity saw attitudes towards the "body, gender, and religious deviance first coalesce to form a particular form of polemic shared" by Christians, Pagans, and Jews (11). Having establishing this groundwork, Cuffel then concentrates on the Jewish and Pagan polemics that sought to degrade Christians by pointing out the problem of placing Jesus in a "filthy" womb, and the Christian responses. Likewise, Jesus' need to eat, defecate, and urinate were seen as indicators that Jesus was not Divine (78). Also, Cuffel analyses the Christian polemics against the newly formed Islamic religion. Christians argued that Muhammad and his followers sought physical rewards and insisted that Muhammad's heaven was a "licentious, obscene place" (76). Part II addresses the use of impurity in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim invective from twelfth-, thirteenth-, and early-fourteenth-century Europe. With the growing medieval Christian piety based on Christ's humanity and the status of Virgin Mary, the "filthy" womb of the Virgin Mother was an increasingly egregious point of attack (108). As Jewish polemic increasingly attacked the doctrine of incarnation, Christians responded by formulating a theology of Mary's body that "set her flesh above the corruptible impurity characterizing" human existence (109). In addition, Cuffel argues that the twelfth-century saw an increase in the number of scholars from all three religions translating each other's primary religious texts and medical texts in order to construct more persuasive polemics (96-97). The last chapter of Part II shifts to the field of visual art. Although Cuffel's central focus is on the "filth" of the female body, she also examines the ways in which religious writers used animal imagery to "remind viewers of moral tales and relatively complex theological ideas" (198). For example, Christians often associated farm animals with the Jews to emphasize their "servile" status. Jews similarly depicted Christians as swine, "the most impure of all creatures" and long associated with dirt, disease, and heresy (224). Cuffel links this section with her arguments on the female body. She suggests that these visual traditions often tied "one's opponent to a filthy animal served to feminize him because of women's strong association with dirt and impurity" (200). Alexandra Cuffel gathers together a diverse and wide-ranging collection of Pagan, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish primary source material in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and vernacular languages to support her arguments. These include medical texts, Bible moralise, poetry, chronicles, biblical commentaries, and other religious texts. Cuffel also extensively utilizes the visual arts, including stained glass windows, church wall carvings, and manuscript illustrations. This is a pioneering work, in part because Cuffel's knowledge of Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic allow her to bring together religious texts that had often only been individually studied before. Alexandra Cuffel's *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* succeeds in tackling a difficult subject, both in its chronology and content. Many sections of her book address subject material long ignored by historians either due to lack of translated sources (perceptions of the body in medieval Islamic religious polemic) or historiographic, political, and social forces (Jewish anti-Christian polemic) (2). Cuffel's central argument that the "filth" of the female body was an integral part of the religious polemic between Pagans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims and Cuffel is intelligent and focused. Overall, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* is an audacious, scholarly, and engaging analysis.

In *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic*, Alexandra Cuffel analyzes medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim uses of gendered bodily imagery and metaphors of impurity in their visual and verbal polemic against one another. Drawing from a rich array of sources including medical texts, bestiaries, Muslim apocalyptic texts, midrash, biblical commentaries, kabbalistic literature, Hebrew liturgical poetry, and theological tracts from late antiquity to the mid-fourteenth century Cuffel examines attitudes toward the corporeal body and its relationship to divinity. She shows that these religious traditions shared notions of the human body as distasteful, with many believers viewing corporeality and communion with the divine as incompatible. In particular, she explores how authors from each religious tradition targeted the woman's body as antithetical to holiness. Foul smell, bodily fluids and states, and animals were employed by these religious communities as powerful tropes, which they used to mark their religious opponents as sinful, filthy, and unacceptable. By defining and denigrating the religious other, each group wielded bodily insult as a means of resistance, of inciting violence, and of creating community boundaries. Representations of impurity or filth designed to inspire revulsion served also to reassure audiences of their religious and sometimes

physical superiority and to encourage oppressive measures toward the minority.

Cuffel's work, through its emphasis on the role of bodily functions in religious polemic, contributes greatly to our understanding of interfaith and intercommunal relations in late antique and medieval cultures. What is most compelling about *Gendering Disgust* is the sheer volume of provocative and entertaining examples Cuffel employs to illustrate these compelling theoretical points. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*