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**David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014)**

Erica Buchberger

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [erica.buchberger@utrgv.edu](mailto:erica.buchberger@utrgv.edu)

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Nirenberg, David. 2014. *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 978-0-226-16893-7. 352 pages. \$45.00.

Interactions between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in medieval Spain have long been a subject of intense debate. Commonly held up as an example of either exceptional tolerance or unforgiving persecution, medieval Spain is made to serve many modern agendas, often with the complexity and nuance contemporaries experienced glossed over. David Nirenberg believes we can do better. His *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*, in the vein of his earlier *Communities of Violence* and works by Brian Catlos and Simon Barton, proposes a more complicated and satisfying picture, here focused on the many ways these neighbors thought about themselves and each other and thus shaped their trajectory.

Nirenberg's unifying theme throughout this book is "coproduction"—the idea that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism "are interdependent, constantly transforming themselves by thinking about each other in a fundamentally ambivalent form of neighborliness" (4). He expressly challenges the commonly held convictions that religious traditions are stable, independent, and inherently violent or tolerant and that better understanding of each others' faiths will end religious violence. Instead, by highlighting the "dynamic and interdependent ways in which religious communities constantly re-create their reality and their history," he hopes to instill greater critical awareness of how Christians, Jews, and Muslims learned to think with and about each other and how we continue this coproduction in the modern world. The book is thus, as the title implies, both a study of a specific medieval environment and a reflection on modern uses of the past.

All chapters except for chapter four are recycled journal articles and essays from edited volumes, reframed to fit the overarching narrative provided in the introduction. Chapter one investigates how Catholic Western Europeans' knowledge of Muslims impacted on their concept of Christendom. He concludes that most Christian authors did not engage with Islamic texts other than as fodder for polemic, mostly to formulate a united Christendom against a common enemy during the Crusades. Chapter two uses records of interfaith conversion, marriage, and adultery between Muslims and Jews to illustrate how changes in relations stemmed from a shift in Christian ideas on Judaism. Chapter three argues that the story of Alfonso VIII's relationship with a Jewess was told and re-told as a way to criticize new forms of government by playing on fears of a king's Jews as the source of both power and corruption. Chapter four shows how these critiques developed into massacres, mass conversions, and expulsions of Jews in 1391 and argues that we should see this phenomenon as "a crisis of sovereignty" (78). Chapter five asks how these massacres and mass conversions changed the ways Christians, Jews, and Muslims perceived each other, particularly in terms of sex and segregation. Nirenberg makes a strong case here that fifteenth-century concerns about *conversos* rested not on their "Jewish" practices but on the blurring of the line between self and other, Christian and Jew, that caused a crisis of identity among Christians.

Chapter six traces emphasis on blood purity and Jewish genealogy, a shift which he calls the "genealogical turn" (139), to the combination of new literary constructions for thinking about Jews and

concurrent social transformations. Nirenberg finishes the chapter by warning scholars against allowing this medieval genealogical paradigm, which was constructed under specific circumstances, to unduly shape their own studies. Chapter seven traces the ways in which genealogical reimagination of Christianity and Judaism was achieved by individual Christians and Jews “reorienting themselves” in a new and uncertain religious landscape (167). In chapter eight, Nirenberg begins his modern reflections with the question of “race” and whether it is a useful category for medieval scholars. He astutely concludes that although contemporaries did not think of “race” the same way as moderns do, they nevertheless had a concept of inherited traits that linked culture with biological reproduction and which, depending on one’s definition, may or may not be described as “racial.” Ultimately, the label is less important than the understanding that medieval people aimed to “naturalize” their histories (190). Chapter nine ends the book with a direct and incisive critique of modern views of Islam and the West. He illustrates how modern Christians, Jews, and Muslims continue to “coproduce” conceptions of themselves and each other through their habits of thought, especially “dialectical teleologies” like clash vs. alliance and inclusion vs. exclusion which Nirenberg cautions are “lethal in whatever form we imbibe them” (211).

The overarching theme of coproduction skillfully connects the various case studies and topical excursions presented in this book. Across chapters, however, the narrative retains some element of the disjointedness that is inevitable in an assemblage of originally-separate articles. The book was intended as a series of connected reflections, and when read with this in mind is successful in its aim to inspire similar critical reflections in its readers. Two minor criticisms center on the title. While some mention is made in this book of the medieval world *outside* of Spain, it is predominately a book about Spain, not about the Middle Ages more broadly. Similarly, little mention is made of the medieval world before the eleventh century. While a subtitle referring to “later medieval Spain” rather than “the Middle Ages” is understandably less desirable when trying to reach a large audience, it would also be less misleading.

Overall, *Neighboring Faiths* presents a strong argument for the importance of understanding the thought-worlds of medieval people and how they constructed (and we construct) a reality within the possibilities that thought-world allows. Nirenberg provides helpful examples richly woven together in each chapter which neatly lead the reader through his *own* thought processes into those of his subjects. In so doing, he offers an insightful new take that will transform the ways scholars of religion, Spain, and the medieval world understand both their subjects and themselves.

Erica Buchberger, The College of Charleston