
Religious Polemics in Context. Papers Presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR) held at Leiden, 27–28 April, 2000. Hetteema, T. L. and A. van der Kooij, eds. Assen: Royal Van Gorkum, 2004. 597p. ISBN 90 232 4133 9; ISSN 1566-208X.

At the international conference held in 2000 at the prestigious Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), the issue of religious diversity is explored from the point of view of the practice of religious controversy, as it is understood across polemical traditions and disciplines. Consequently, the papers collected in this hefty volume of almost 600 pages do, indeed, give a good image of what this growing interdisciplinary field of research is all about: the history and the particular articulations of religious traditions or paradigms are examined within oppositional contexts, thus adding a welcome dynamic as well as a much needed (transcultural) interfaith aspect. This relatively new disciplinary field is a field that preserves and presupposes the critical valorization of earlier achievements in the disciplines of religious history, comparative religion and theology, while allowing for a constructive and equally critical use of the newest methodologies in humanities: theory of argumentation, pragmatics, rhetorical studies, deconstructive techniques in philology, etc. Coming after the LISOR conference on the definitions of religion, published in 1999, the conference on religious polemic is—understandably—focussed by an interest in defining polemics in the context of religious discourses. The organizers of the meeting of 2000, a meeting that assembled controversy researchers from many parts of the world, define religious polemic according to the Webster Dictionary as “the art or practice of disputation or controversy”. This broad definition is however sufficiently focussed to allow for both a wide array of theoretical and methodological approaches and a well circumscribed series of case studies: while the area of Christianity is privileged, occupying roughly half of the volume, the religious traditions of controversy and debate in Judaism and Islam are also represented. The collection of some 30 studies is organized in 5 parts: general issues, history of religions, ancient Israel and early Christianity, history of Christianity and social sciences of religion.

The first division of the collection, “general issues”, groups together two interesting studies that have an introductory function, despite being quite dissimilar in their approach and depth of treatment: Marcelo Dascal’s “On the Uses of Argumentative Reason in Religious Polemics” is a paper that articulates a simplified structural typology of religious polemics within the broader frame of strategic procedures of oppositional confrontations. Within the larger frame of general polemical exchanges—classified by Dascal after their intensity of argumentative disagreement into discussions, disputes and controversies, religious polemics are systematically sorted in three broad categories, according to the “scope of the belief base shared by the participants” (p.9): *intra-faith*, *inter-faith* and *extra-faith* polemical encounters. Needless to say, this abstract classification—aiming at a general methodology of descriptive evaluation—has

to be adjusted to particular contexts. On the other hand, Theo Hetteema's paper, "The Noble Art of Self-Defence: Schleiermacher and Von Clausewitz on Theological Polemics and the Theory of Warfare", examines the ideology of the apologetic discourse of resistance, defence and antagonism in theological polemics and in warfare theory according to Schleiermacher and Von Clausewitz. This allows for a very stimulating discussion of Schleiermacher's "Brief Outline of the Study of Theology" (1811), a text closely related to his lectures at the universities of Berlin and Halle and conveying a new—characteristically *Frühromantik*—view of Protestant theology. According to Hetteema, this brief yet encyclopaedic work also repositions the traditional discipline of polemical theology within a system of philosophical theology that is proper to Schleiermacher himself: within this systematic field, the *polemic* and the *apologetic* receive different discursive tasks, the apologetic order of discourse being perceived as oriented towards homiletics and therefore modeled by an audience-response function, while polemical theology is credited with the specific task of the "internal defence of the truth of a tradition" (p.24). By reading Schleiermacher through Von Clausewitz's dialectic of defence and attack, Hetteema offers a contextual critique of Schleiermacher's vision of religious polemic within the history of German ideology of modernity. This, in turn, opens the way towards a better evaluation of polemical negotiations in religious and ecclesiastical history. If anything, both these introductory studies convey the need for more case studies, indicating the need for an appropriate examination of the historical and comparative contexts of particular controversies in the history of religious traditions. The second, the third and the fourth part of the collection will do just that.

The second part of this book is dedicated to the study of controversies in the history of religions and, in keeping with the double methodology asserted by the two introductory essays, the section assembles many interesting case studies, stretching from the ancient Middle East (Assyria and Persia) to medieval Europe; among them, the three contributions on Islamic religious polemic and the two studies of polemical works foregrounding Jewish personalities, bring forth a wealth of information showing the inner relation between previously unconnected elements.

Of the three papers dedicated to the exploration of religious polemics in Islam, one is an erudite philological presentation of the questions related to the "Apology of Al-Kindi" (a controversy between a Christian and a Muslim from the XII century), another a well balanced discussion of the place of religious controversy in early Islam, "Dialogue with Other Faith as an Aspect of Islamic Theology", while a third contribution strives to assess various aspects of current Islamic religious propaganda in the West. Judaism is represented in this part of the book by a discussion of controversial attitudes towards both rabbinical Judaism and *kabbala*, documentary traditions that seem ambiguously situated on the margins of "dogmatic" Judaism, yet somehow bordering on the Christian concepts of the sacred. The two case studies presented are both intriguing and fascinating, because they show how some Jewish-Christian debates and controversies did actually engage a deeper dialogical relationship between religious cultures otherwise deemed quite separated by hostility and

misunderstanding. While this kind of dialogical approach is more visible in the case of the XVIII century Jewish convert and commentator Moses Aaron-Johan Kemper, author of *Me'yrat 'enaym* (1704)—a work, as M. Eskhult shows, intent on rearticulating the Christian messianic discourse of the New Testament by correlating it with Judaic traditions and thus elaborating a brand new exegetical typology—the case of an early *kabbalist* examined by Alon Goshen-Gottstein is even more intriguing in its reading of contradictory strategies and divergent contexts. The paper, aptly titled “The Triune and Decaune God: Christianity and Kabbalah as Objects of Jewish Polemics with Special Reference to Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne’s *Milhemet Mitzva*” examines an encyclopaedic work of religious controversy still little studied or understood.

The third part of the papers in this collection, “Ancient Israel and Early Christianity”, is more unequal, despite its thematic continuity; concerned chiefly with the controversy content in the Bible, it sets out to explore by close readings passages from both canonical and extracanonical books. Interpretations of polemical passages in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1, Second Isaiah, Jeremiah 44, Hosea 2) are followed by neotestamentary examinations of polemical strategies in broader textual units in the Gospels of Mark and, respectively, the Gospel of John. Fittingly, the well known debate in the apocryphal “Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions” is considered in a paper by J. Verheyden, who adds a new interpretive twist to a very complicated question of literary and religious history; by exploring the Pseudo Clementines in light of their polemical content the author manages to establish their place in a neglected tradition of congregational controversy in formative Christianity. A similar attempt at articulating a new historical vision of ancient times is visible in Simon Mimouni’s contribution: it attempts to reconstruct a dateline for the early split between Jewish and Christian communities, between 70–135 AD according to the available literary texts of the period.

The fourth and the fifth sections of this collection of studies are taken up by the “History of Christianity” and by the “Social Sciences of Religion”. Together, these last two sections draw a more complex picture of the place of the controversial in the Western discourse of religion, demonstrating that the investigation of religious argumentation in polemical settings leads to a better and more exact representation of theological and philosophical abilities in the use of discursive reason. What I find particularly interesting and really challenging is the fact that the editors of this collection are striving continuously to balance the historical approach and the erudite discussion of various religious traditions with a look to the present day state of affairs in religious controversies and religious disagreement. This volume of studies from LISOR is thus an apt representation of the state of scholarship in the European study of religious controversial discourses. Despite its obvious eclecticism, quite understandably a consequence of the ambition to broadly cover as many areas of investigation as possible, it constitutes a welcome addition to an important multidisciplinary field.

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