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Renard, John. *Crossing Confessional Boundaries: Exemplary Lives in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Traditions*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020. 978-0-520-28792-1. xii-345 Pp. Paperback \$34.95/£29.00.

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Since the publication of Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* in 1971,¹ there has been an increase in the study of the period after the decline of Roman hegemony in the Mediterranean, which has furthered the push against the antiquated Pirenne Thesis. Moreover, recent studies on Late Antique identity, such as Jonathan Conant's *Staying Roman* or Robin Whelan's *Being Christian in Vandal Africa*;² local religious communities, such as David Frankfurter's *Christianizing Egypt* or Jean-Luc Fournet's *The Rise of Coptic*;³ Christians and the advent of Islam, such as Michael Penn's *Envisioning Islam* or Stephen Shoemaker's *The Apocalypse of Empire*,⁴ have enriched how we see the cultural, religious, and political differences that were also the hallmark of this period in Mediterranean history. Rather than problematically speaking about decline and fall, and subsequent local attempts at damage control, scholars have rightly studied the period as possessing its own distinct characteristics that provide us much to consider. And as the aforementioned studies underscore, the Late Antique/Early Medieval Mediterranean should be studied as broadly as we study all periods of Mediterranean history.

However, like other periods in Mediterranean history, Late Antiquity suffers from the Braudelian problem of a continued emphasis on structures over the individual. While individual voices have increasingly been heard, the place of cultural mediators and transconfessional figures whose presence shaped the experience of societies and faiths has not been thoroughly or adequately explored. Serving to rectify this is John Renard's fine book that synthesizes a number of historiographical strands to posit that "the single most important element in Abrahamic cross-confessional relations has been an ongoing mutual interest in perennial spiritual-ethical exemplars of one another's communities" (vii). Renard constructs "a large narrative on the basis of recent publications by scores of scholars in Late Antique and early medieval sources, by distilling from their remarkable contributions the outlines of a more expansive picture" (ix) of individual holy men and women who served as exemplars that cut across the three Abrahamic faiths.

Renard's book homes in on what Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have in common rather than what separates them. Calling this "the Abrahamic genome," Renard's central premise is that, because all three faiths share at their core a certain number of beliefs—in particular, a singular God who communicates through human intermediaries who often serve as ethical and religious exemplars—human go-betweens serve as "carriers of the Abrahamic DNA, and thus as facilitators of interfaith relationships across many centuries" (1). By centering the study around exemplars who share similar traits and are in some cases venerated by members of two or even

all three Abrahamic faiths, Renard illuminates that collective memory, religious hybridity, cultural syncretism, and acculturation produced in interfaith contact zones resulted in “interlocking histories of the Abrahamic faiths” (2). By thinking of this not simply as boundary-crossing but as evidence of shared and borrowed experiences across confessional lines, Renard reminds us that “political maps have represented a small fraction of what one needs to know of the cross-traditional interactions of Muslim, Christian, and other faith communities across the late ancient and medieval Mediterranean” (4). Renard thus presents a nuanced picture of Late Antiquity, one in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in a shared cultural landscape where similarity and difference were not so clear-cut.

After an introduction that maps out how the book will approach Abrahamic exemplary lives in the Mediterranean from 300 to 1300, Renard unpacks his argument across three parts, each divided into three chapters. “Part One: Geographies Shared—Historical/Anthropological Perspectives” divides the Mediterranean in three: The Central Middle East (Chapter One), Spain and North Africa (Chapter Two), and Anatolia and the Balkans (Chapter Three). Such an approach highlights how regional differences impacted the ways in which local communities venerated exemplary lives but still stresses their similarities, especially regarding the types of sites and terrains where one found holy men and women. These three chapters cover the same themes: how interconfessional terrain was epistemologically mapped; the role of the environment and nature; sacred places and pilgrimage routes; notions of community, Christianization, and Islamization. That said, this is an important reminder that, despite these similarities, the very different political and social contexts of, say, al-Andalus compared to Umayyad Damascus or Abbasid Baghdad mean that these figures often possess locally specific functions.

“Part Two: Hagiographies Compared—Literary Perspectives: Form, Content, and Function” investigates the ways in which the hagiographical tradition—often treated as uniquely Christian—existed in Judaism and Islam as well. Such an approach not only illuminates the role of hagiography in each tradition but permits an investigation of the “rich treasury of sources for intertraditional comparison and contrast as well” (95). Chapter Four makes the case for how hagiography works, its types of genres beyond traditional saints’ lives, and considers form, content, and function to show that hagiography’s emphasis on exemplarity underscores that the three hagiographic traditions were not mutually exclusive. Chapter Five, “Hagiography Deconstructed,” explores themes of intercession and miracle. By focusing on how exemplary figures served as mediators between man and God, Renard again stresses that, despite many theological differences, the wondrous figure pervaded all three faiths. Chapter Six unpacks the literary function of hagiography and how authorial intent and questions of reception functioned to solidify senses of community, maintain boundaries, and even serve to ossify constructions of family and gender.

“Part Three: Dramatis Personae: History, Authority, and Community” focuses on how exemplary figures afforded to the community a sense of collective memory and legitimacy. Renard shows how exemplary figures such as founders, warriors, martyrs, and matriarchs provided a historical narrative for the community (Chapter Seven). Likewise, the role of epistemic and charismatic authority across all three faiths reveals how hagiographic traditions legitimate the authority of figures as exemplars through comparing them to scriptural exemplars, placing them within institutional structures, and presenting them as storytellers, preachers, lecturers, letter-writers, and visionaries (Chapter Eight). Finally, Chapter Nine presents the ways in which “boundary-crossing exemplars have functioned in their respective faith traditions,

arguably the most important in the context of the present study is their central role in creating, attracting, and anchoring communities of seekers and devotees” (228). Building on the previous two chapters, this chapter shows how the legitimation not just of particular individuals but of the notion of the exemplary figure as an archetype allowed for communities of discipleship and collective asceticism to develop in what Renard calls the “eschatology-rich environment” (249) of the Late Antique Mediterranean.

Finally, Renard’s conclusion is a call for further research. His suggestions for new avenues of study range from comparisons of illuminated/illustrated lives of Christians and Muslims to collected miracle accounts and salutary intercession. He also prompts scholars to move beyond the Mediterranean to include comparing Abrahamic faiths as far afield as Southeast Asia or comparing them alongside non-Abrahamic faiths such as Hinduism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. This conclusion suggests, rightly, that there is much still to be done regarding interconfessional contact and interfaith patterns of belief and praxis.

John Renard is one of few scholars to possess the intellectual toolkit and dexterity necessary for the breadth of *Crossing Confessional Boundaries* and the ways in which it weaves multiple historiographical strands together. The result is a book that is well written, engaging, and possesses none of the dryness that historiographical synthesis often can. It is an accessible, welcome foray into a large body of scholarship. On the whole, Renard’s contribution is two-fold. First, while scholars of the Mediterranean are coming around to the importance of individuals who purposefully transcend boundaries, Renard shows us that there is still much to say regarding individuals and communities that operated in a fluid landscape where difference, similarity, and boundaries were constantly negotiated concepts. Second, and perhaps more important, Renard shows that these three faiths, despite often being in conflict, shared traditions that inextricably linked them in real time. While this is perhaps not an original argument per se—scholars have long studied these links, and discuss what tolerance would have looked like—it is never an unwelcome reminder that the three Abrahamic faiths were so deeply entangled theologically, historically, and culturally that to speak of them as three distinct faith traditions is to potentially misunderstand the ways in which each developed alongside one another and how their adherents saw one another. The Clash of Civilizations thesis of Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, and others has long been debunked. But the continued prevalence of such views of Orientalist antithesis in modern discourse obscures the historical reality of theological similarities and how exemplary lives resonated with Jews, Christians, and Muslims, whether in Iberia, Egypt, or the Balkans. *Crossing Confessional Boundaries* reminds us that Late Antiquity was not a period of crisis and decline or the beginning of the end of intercultural cross-fertilization. Rather it was both built upon previous traditions and was one of deep cross-cultural contacts and complex interfaith encounters.

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Author's Response:

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.

¹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971).

² Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robin Whelan, *Being Christian in Vandal Africa: The Politics of Orthodoxy in the Post-Imperial West* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

³ David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Jean-Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴ Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).