

important part of the cult of Guðmundr. Chapter 8 is concerned with Guðmundr's posthumous fame and focuses on his relics, the translation of his remains, and the recorded exhumations. It also examines the role of the Hólar bishops in promoting his cult. In a final chapter, Skórzewska concludes that the veneration of Guðmundr was not as widespread as the sagas and modern critics suggest. She further argues that "it was not as extensive before or during the first decades after the translation," but that "it might have intensified due to the spread of the contents of the sagas" (269). In her view, "it is not certain that Guðmundr would have attracted as much attention as he did long after his death, had it not been for the fourteenth-century narratives" (277). With regard to Guðmundr's personality, she maintains that "[a]ll the narratives agree about [*sic*] his being an approachable, caring, though certainly not submissive man, capable of bringing vengeance on those who needed a reprimand. The devotion to the Virgin Mary, the use of relics, and especially the power of water consecrated by him distinguishes him from Jón and Þorlákr as much as the acknowledgement of his *in vita* saintliness. None of his counterparts had that many female adversaries and companions" (277). Eight appendices (on offerings listed in miracle stories, miracle stories mentioning the provision of food, Bishop Auðunn's translation of Guðmundr's remains as recorded in Icelandic annals, the cult of vernacular saints as recorded in Icelandic annals, obituaries of holy men as recorded in Icelandic annals, days honoring the Icelandic holy bishops as recorded in charters, the geographical distribution of images and sagas of the Icelandic holy bishops, and episcopal sees and religious houses in Iceland), one map, two genealogical tables showing Guðmundr's family, a bibliography, and an index round off the volume.

Skórzewska has made a significant contribution to the study of the veneration of native saints in Iceland in the Middle Ages generally and the cult of Guðmundr in particular. The book is well structured, and her observations and arguments are sound and sober. Despite its exciting topic and scholarly merits, it takes something of a grim determination to make it through the book, for it is written in stilted and often unidiomatic English, there are grammatical errors, and the punctuation is erratic and bizarre. These errors, combined with the excessive use of modifiers, such as "quite," "probably," and "hardly," and vague formulations, such as "might suggest," "might indicate," and "appears to," are distracting, for the reader often has to pause in order to figure out what the author is trying to say. One would hope that in the future the editorial board of the Northern World series will show more responsibility in ensuring more thorough copyediting and that Brill will take more care in the production and publication of its books.

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JUSTIN K. STEARNS, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. xx, 279. \$60. ISBN: 9780801898730. doi:10.1017/S0038713413001371

"Comparative history," Justin Stearns tells us in his preface, "is difficult, in part because it implies equivalences where they often do not exist (xiii)." Despite the undeniable appeal of comparative history in the case of medieval Iberia, the author does not overstate the challenge that a broad treatment of any aspect of medieval cultural interaction implies. Yet Stearns adroitly avoids the pitfalls he warns of, and his opening caveat sets the tone for what is a remarkably prudent and discerning analysis elaborated throughout this fascinating study. While this success can largely be attributed to his own wide-ranging command of both Christian and Muslim sources in a host of languages, including Arabic, Latin, Castilian, and Catalan, it also owes something to his shrewd choice of subject. This book is a comparison of medieval Christian and Muslim ideas about contagion and the

transmissibility of disease in selected texts ranging from antiquity to the late nineteenth century, covering in particular the seventh to the fifteenth centuries.

The topic of contagion is a perfect touchstone for so wide a swath of periods and texts not only because it drives at the heart of Christian and Muslim ideas of disease, but also because it begs theological and philosophical questions that are inherently points of distinction between Christian and Muslim thinkers. Stearns's principal arguments can be summarized as saying that medieval Muslim and Christian writers treated the subject of contagion in many different and often disparate ways, that it is a mistake to see any one theory of disease as universally dominant or comprehensively representative, and that modern notions of how disease was understood in the Middle Ages are easily clouded by overweening confidence in a scientific worldview. Because, as Stearns deftly shows, contagion functioned as much as a metaphor (for foreignness, heresy, and difference more generally) as it did a topic of scientific knowledge or religious belief, it can work for modern historians as a kind of skeleton key that opens polemical and theological doors as easily as medical ones.

Stearns develops his sophisticated and nuanced argument in dialogue with earlier attempts to treat contagion and disease in a comparative context, above all the work of Michael Dols (*The Black Death in the Middle East*, 1977). At the same time, he is thoroughly aware of how the comparison of Muslim and Christian ideas of the etiology of disease can easily reinforce triumphalist stereotypes that distinguish between premodern ignorance and the modern "discovery" of microbes and infection, and how this opposition reproduces a teleological view of modern science as inherently Western and modern. As he argues, "the understanding of science and even rationality as somehow intrinsically Western or European has influenced—I would argue distorted—our understanding of Muslim attitudes toward epidemic disease and the concept of contagion in the late medieval and early modern periods" (141). In challenging these views, Stearns is also productively engaged with historians of medicine such as Andrew Cunningham, whose work has been seminal in critiquing the bias of scholars employing a "laboratory view" to discuss responses to disease before the nineteenth century.

The six main chapters alternate discussions of Muslim and Christian ideas about contagion and disease, with noticeably more attention given to Muslim sources. Stressing the multiplicity of Muslim theories of contagion, Stearns approaches them from a number of different perspectives, including those found in prophetic traditions about Muḥammad, in medical treatises based on Greek models, in Islamic legal theory, and in Islamic theology. The foundation for subsequent medical and legal debates were the traditions attributed in ḥadīth collections to the Prophet Muḥammad himself, who is alleged to have affirmed that there is, on the one hand, "no contagion, no evil omen" but at the same time recommended that one not water sick and mangy animals with healthy ones and that one ought to flee lepers "like lions." Stearns explores these views in the first chapter, showing how later traditionalists—most notably Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), among numerous others—attempted to reconcile apparently contradictory prescriptions. Such traditional views, even those rejecting contagion, were of critical importance for practical responses to epidemics in Muslim societies that would seem to embrace a very different view of disease.

In the third chapter, Stearns elaborates on the multiplicity of ideas and responses to disease in his survey of Muslim treatises written in the wake of the Black Death in the second half of the eighth/fourteenth century. Traditional Islamic medicine, which was combined with ideas drawn from religious traditions, generally affirmed the notion of the transmission of disease, especially through a Galenic notion of "miasma" and the corruption caused by foul air or through being "pricked" internally by Jinn. Stearns shows how traditionalist writers in the fourteenth century, such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya and others,

blended their ideas with theories drawn from Greco-Islamic medicine in a variety of ways. Stearns then places contemporary Andalusī plague treatises (such as those by Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Khātima), which have often been singled out by modern historians of medicine as being more scientific and rational because of their views of contagion, in the context of these more traditional texts. He shows that although these writers did encourage empirical observation and affirm the transmissibility of disease, they were, like more traditional religious writers, working to reconcile a host of sources and views, including those of prophetic tradition, empirical observation, and Islamic theology.

It is in the fifth chapter, which treats the concept of contagion in Islamic law and theology, that Stearns arrives at the crux of the matter guiding the earlier discussions, namely, how those with no knowledge of microbes reconciled empirical observation of sickness with belief in God's omnipotence. An unwavering faith in God as the efficient cause of all things gave rise to Muslim notions of occasionalism, the belief that God directly causes all things to happen in every moment and that nothing has agency or existence without him. At issue within an occasionalist worldview, which flourished under the theological school of Ash'arism, founded in the tenth century, was how to understand observable cause and effect (such as that of wool catching fire when touched with a flame) without believing in secondary causation or the independent agency of natural things apart from God's will, beliefs associated with idolatry and a denial of God's unity and omnipotence. Through a detailed discussion of Mālikī legal opinions such as those of Ibn Rushd al-Jadd, Ibn Lubb, and later scholars, Stearns shows how North African and Andalusī jurists worked to balance medical knowledge with theological beliefs, offering explanations such as those of God's "habit" (*āda*) to explain miracles alongside the logical repetition of natural events and to rule on the ethical question of whether a person is permitted to flee an area stricken with epidemic disease. In his final chapter, Stearns follows this debate within various writings on the plague from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, ending with the complex ideas of Algerian scholar Ḥamdān Khoja (d. ca. 1258/1842), who sought to reconcile traditional legal and theological writing with modern Western theories of disease and the value of quarantine that he learned through contact with French colonial powers.

This discussion of Islamic notions of contagion is detailed and far-reaching, taking in an impressive range of texts and reading legal, theological, medical, and traditionalist sources from over a millennium of Muslim thought. Stearns contrasts this body of material with some interesting observations about contemporary Christian writing on disease, taken up in the second and fourth chapters. The second chapter focuses on the use of contagion as a metaphor for heresy and sin in a wide sampling of Iberian Christian authors, including Bishop Isidore of Seville in the seventh century, Cantabrian monk Beato of Liébana in the eighth, Castilian King Alfonso X in the thirteenth, and Valencian Dominican Vicente Ferrer in the fifteenth. Chapter four looks at Iberian plague treatises alongside discussions of visual contagion among fifteenth-century humanists, in particular notions of the evil eye in writers such as Enrique de Villena and Alfonso Fernández de Madrigal (El Tostado). Stearns also includes a brief discussion in the appendix about contagion in Christian exegesis, especially Jerome.

The findings of this comparison are that, although Muslim and Christian writers drew from a common medical heritage, "what contagion *signified* for Muslims and Christians was determined by their respective cultural and religious traditions, and these differed substantially" (11, emphasis Stearns). He shows that Christian writers, on the whole, were more interested in the metaphoric valence of contagion, while Muslim writers, in general, focused on the "theological implications of disease transmission" (167). While this comparison is useful and helps to underscore the point that ideas about disease need to be examined within their historical and cultural contexts, it is only a part of Stearns's larger discussion. This book is, it must be said, more a study of Muslim ideas of contagion than

Christian ones (the author dedicates more than twice as much space to Muslim texts), and Stearns might have done better to state from the outset that his Christian examples serve mainly as a counterpoint for comparison with his more abundant Muslim material.

Despite this slight imbalance in focus and depth, Stearns succeeds in conveying the variety of Muslim perspectives about the existence and mechanism of contagion as well as the notable difference between Muslim and Christian approaches to the issue. However, the greatest contribution of this ambitious study is that it exposes the risk of the significant misunderstanding that can result from “projecting a laboratory understanding of plague” (68) onto thought born of a very different worldview, whether Christian or Muslim. Stearns’s analysis, which beyond its scholarly erudition evinces a laudable capacity for historiographical empathy that transcends both presentist and Eurocentric biases, shows that if we are to begin to understand past responses to epidemics, we must avoid dismissing premodern knowledge for being limited by a lack of modern scientific data. This is, to be sure, a tall order, given that such data constitutes part of nearly everyone’s normal understanding of reality. Nevertheless, “If we recognize that diseases are social constructions at least as much as they are biological entities, then we need to maintain constant vigilance against the temptation of finding today’s diseases and their means of transmission in the past” (5). Stearns’s important and eloquent book forces us to recognize the complexity of the issues at stake in the study of contagion in Muslim and Christian sources. Above all, he provokes us to reflect on how our own prejudices may be built into the very questions we ask about the nature of disease in the past, and may condition our ability to understand the answers we find.

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SUZANNE PINCKNEY STETKEYCH, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muḥammad*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Pp. xix, 307. \$75. ISBN: 9780253354877. doi:10.1017/S0038713413001383

Ka’b ibn Zuhayr, a contemporary of the Prophet Muḥammad, satirized him and his Muslim followers. At some stage, just as some people in recent times who criticized the Prophet, he feared for his life. He composed an ode in praise of Muḥammad, who gracefully accepted his conversion and honored him by giving him his mantle. The poem became famous as the “Mantle Ode.” It is quite pagan in character: Muḥammad is praised more as a tribal leader than as a religious innovator or as a prophet; the praise is preceded by a description of a camel, and the poem starts with an amatory passage on a girl called Su’ād, for whom the poet is love-sick. Strikingly, wine is mentioned in what is in effect an “Islamic” poem. The Prophet is likened to “an Indian sword, one of the swords of God”; his followers are described as fearless warriors. The Qur’an is briefly mentioned, but one could not call the “Mantle Ode” a religious poem.

Famous though it is, its popularity is dwarfed by that of a much later poem, also called the “Mantle Ode.” The Egyptian poet al-Būṣīrī (d. c.1295) composed it when he was cured of an illness, after dreaming that the Prophet threw his mantle over him. This most popular of Arabic poems spread over the whole Islamic world, in numerous adaptations, expansions, and translations. The blessing bestowed on the poet spilled over on the poem itself, which is widely regarded as having talismanic properties. Like Ka’b’s poem and countless other odes, it opens with a short passage on love, but this time it is understood not as love merely for a woman but for an abstract beloved who stands for the Prophet himself, or perhaps even God, in Sufi fashion. The main part of the relatively long poem lists the virtues and miracles of the Prophet, with many references to episodes in his career. It is therefore not only a devotional poem but also a didactic one.