



VISITING  
SCHOLAR  
PROGRAM

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## Public Lecture Offerings

### Rabbis, Priests, Imams, and Infidels: Engaging the Other's Religion in the Medieval Mediterranean

Throughout much of the Mediterranean region in the Middle Ages, Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in the same cities, often in the same neighborhoods, and sometimes in the same houses. This lecture will explore what happened when scholars from among the three religions took the time to learn about their neighbors' religions through learning their languages, reading their holy books, and studying their theologies. Of course, they were often appalled by what they discovered, but just as often, they found ideas, practices, and beliefs that impressed them. Indeed, often they borrowed from each other, as when Christians in the Middle East adopted Islamic theological language to express Christian doctrine, or when pious Jews repackaged Sufi practices for Jewish audiences. At the extremes, this exploration could lead to outright persecution, such as when learned Dominican priests became inquisitors, but it could also culminate in something quite different: conversion. The lecture will, in fact, conclude with reflections on both a Franciscan who became a Muslim and a Rabbi who became a Christian bishop in the late Middle Ages.

THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM 2026-2027

### **A Multi-Lingual Priest Confronts a Multi-Religious World: Ramon Martí (fl. 1250-84) and the Religions of the Book**

The greatest European linguist between late antiquity and the seventeenth century, Ramon Martí had exquisite expertise in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. As a member of the Dominican order of priests, he was called to preach the Gospel to the whole world, and his surviving works reveal that he took this calling seriously. He had read widely in the core texts of both Islam and Judaism and applied this knowledge in writing deeply learned works that critiqued those religions. But his engagement with these religions and their intellectual traditions was in certain ways puzzling. For one thing, he had far more to say about Judaism than Islam, even though he lived in the Crown of Aragon, which had a huge population of restive Muslim subjects, but only a tiny, non-threatening community of Jews. Furthermore, while he was clearly a hostile critic of Islam, he was a lifelong admirer of Arab philosophy, which he read in Arabic until the end of his life. This lecture will explore his intense and surprising interrogation of the religions of the book.

### **Greek Qur'āns and Latin Talmuds: Translating Holy Books in the Medieval World**

In the multi-lingual lands surrounding the Mediterranean, many scholars labored to make translations of their own or others' holy books. Jews and Christians in the lands of Islam made many Arabic versions of Biblical books, while Muslims in Iran and Iberia, respectively, put the Qur'ān into Persian and Spanish. In order to learn about and refute Islam and Judaism, moreover, Christians translated the Qur'ān into Greek and Latin, and even produced a Latin anthology of the vast Babylonian Talmud. But translation is an immensely complicated process, and this lecture will focus on some of the surprising ironies that it engendered in these cases. Because holy books are often difficult to understand, for example, all translators—whether of their own scriptures or others'—found themselves turning repeatedly to traditional sources of scriptural exegesis, such as commentaries or informants, to help them make sense of what they read, and almost always subtle but important changes in meaning inevitably ensued as well.

## Classroom Discussion Topics

### **Medieval Arab Christianity: The Most Understudied Topic in Christian History**

1. As Princeton historian Jack Tannous has pointed out, in the early medieval period, far more Christians lived in the Muslim Caliphate, which embraced the lands from the Pyrenees through North Africa and Egypt to Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Iran, than under Byzantine or Latin rule. It did not take long before this vast Christian population became speakers of Arabic and participants in the dynamic culture of the Islamic world while remaining Christians for generations. This lecture will focus especially on how such Christians adopted some aspects of Muslim culture even as they rejected others as strategies for sectarian survival.

### **Why 'Mediterranean' History**

2. Increasingly, scholars of the Middle Ages are expanding the geographical scope of their inquiries to encompass all regions around the Mediterranean Sea, rather than focusing, say, on just Latin Europe or Arab Islam. This lecture/discussion will explore the advantages of doing so, stressing especially how it allows historians to observe long-enduring, deeply pluralistic societies as the norm rather than the exception.

3. Any of the above lecture topics may be adapted for classroom discussion.