RESPONSES TO ISSUE 16

RESPONSE TO "MULTICULTURALISM IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE"

Nancy A. Jones, Cambridge, Massachusetts

I am grateful to the contributors to the Fall MFN Commentary Section, "Multiculturalism in the Middle Ages," for their eye-opening essays about various cultural and intellectual currents of the Middle Ages which have traditionally been considered marginal to medieval studies. I also appreciate the bibliographies offered in these essays. Arlyn Diamond is surely right in connecting our desire to find "a narrative of [cultural] reciprocity" in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period with our desire for a world tolerant of cultural heterogeneity. The urgency of such a desire for multicultural coexistence and reciprocity is all too real in a world beset by violent political and social fragmentation. Whether we choose to look for historical origins to intolerance, as do the essays by Susan Schibanoff, Esther Zago and Steven Kruger, or to expose what Sylvia Tomasch calls the "naturalization" of intolerance within our own scholarly traditions, it seems all the more important to understand why periods and sites of peaceful cultural heterogeneity appear to be historical interludes rather than the norm.

It was interesting to encounter the current trends in thinking among MFN contributors. In response, I would like to register a few comments and queries. As a group, the essays rightly emphasize the historically contingent and interrelated nature of forms of medieval and Renaissance intolerance. Most of the essays offer critiques of traditional paradigms of literary and cultural history and outline areas for future research. Arlyn Diamond's "The Scandal of Antioch" gives a provocative interpretation of Eleanor of Aquitaine's experience in Antioch. While I am not necessarily convinced that Eleanor would have found Muslim and Byzantine society less patriarchal and xenophobic than European society [why must other cultures always be imagined as either the same or the opposite to ours?], historical speculations such as Diamond's are valuable, if only because they challenge the ideology behind the dominant historical narratives about prominent women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine.

I was also intrigued by the unstated, yet important relationship between multiculturalist inquiry and cross-cultural inquiry that marked a few of the essays. Both Cynthia Ho and Maghan Keita advocate what I would call cross-cultural study of texts and traditions. Cross-cultural inquiry seeks to establish parallels between different cultures which cannot always be explained as the result of historical transmission, as is clearly the case when one compares the courtly literatures of Heian Japan and twelfth-century France. I myself find the cross-cultural study of courtly societies a useful alternative to the search for historical origins of Western courtly love or courtliness. In an age obsessed with difference, the discovery of unexpected analogies between historically unrelated cultures and literatures is a welcome reassurance that there may be some common ground for humanity. Or is it? In teaching an undergraduate seminar on courtly societies in cross-cultural perspective, I found my students were as impressed by the
differences between Heian courtly culture and Western courtly culture as they were by
the similarities identified by Cynthia Ho. They perceived radically different attitudes
toward the body and gender roles in the poetry and narratives of these cultures, while
being overwhelmed by the sexism characteristic of both traditions. Less easy to get at
was the role of literary discourse itself in shaping the gender ideologies of each culture.

Several essays offer useful methodological models for multiculturalist inquiry.
Glory Dharmaraj's essay articulates the hermeneutic stance characteristic of post-
poststructuralist criticism. Her remarks about the multiculturalist reader's receptivity to
colonized, native voices within texts are strikingly similar to feminist critics' attempts to
hear the "resistant" voices of women in male-authored texts such as that demonstrated by
Karen Robertson's essay on Pocahontas provides a valuable personal record of her
attempt to conduct some feminist archeology into the occluded history of a popular icon
of American colonial history. It was fascinating to read about Pocahontas from the
perspective of a specialist in Women's Studies and Early Modern English literature. The
essay is unique in its recounting of an actual research project undertaken by a feminist
scholar committed to working from a multiculturalist perspective in a pre-modern field.
Robertson's discussion of the multiple methodological perspectives required to recover
some trace of the historical Pocahontas' perspective and the changes in her own
preconceptions of her project and the type of conclusions she could draw from her
sources illustrate concretely the difficulties confronting scholars who seek to recover
traces of a doubly displaced subjectivity from a diverse and problematic historical record.
More case studies of this type, or reports on work-in-progress, would be valuable to MFN
readers.

The essay "Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Africa and Medieval and
Renaissance History" by Maghan Keita makes a strong plea for the type of work I would
like to see take place within a multiculturalist movement among medievalists, namely the
study of original sources from non-European cultures. While it is quixotic and unfair to
demand that anyone interested in speaking and writing about multicultural issues in these
periods learn non-Western languages and acquire a specialist's knowledge of say, Arabic
chronicle writing, nevertheless it is important to study other cultures and groups on their
own terms. In other words we need to study not only the medieval Western discourse of
homophobia, misogyny, or orientalism, anti-semitism, etc., but also the primary texts of
these Others. Surely the multiculturalist movement should at least advocate and support
the study of non-European languages, traditions, texts, and histories so that our
scholarship, political rhetoric, and teaching are not completely dependent upon translated
text and secondary sources by specialists in those fields (whose agenda is often quite
different from that of multiculturalists).

Such advocacy can take several forms. First, we could individually and collectively
establish ongoing dialogues and partnerships with scholars in non-Western fields. This is
not always easy to do, as I found out in organizing a symposium on courtly literature in
cross-cultural perspective at Harvard University in 1992. There is a decided resistance to
such collective work on the part of specialists, who are often skeptical about finding any
common ground for discussion. Indeed such forums can produce rather fumbling and
trivial exchanges. Good faith takes some time to establish. And yet to keep our thinking
honest, we need to test our multiculturalist hypotheses about issues of gender, race, religion, and sexuality against the specialized knowledge held by scholars in the relevant non-Western fields. Such active, face-to-face exchanges would take us a step beyond simply consulting the published works of these scholars, because if we draw them into an exchange, there is no hierarchy of knowledge between Western and non-Western fields. The intellectual paradigms of every field would thus be open to scrutiny and critique.

Second, we can work within our institutions to make a place for interested graduate students to acquire training in non-Western fields in addition to their standard medievalist training. Again, this is an idealistic desideratum, but such a commitment seems to me crucial to the pursuit of multiculturalism. As an example of how the “progressive” part of the academy neglects this issue, I would cite the case of a graduate student in French Studies at Harvard who wanted to combine her Old French Studies with Arabic. She received very lukewarm support for this ambition because the graduate committee felt that she would be neglecting “theory.” This student was encountering a form of institutional resistance comparable to that identified by Steven Epstein in his essay, “Medieval Multiculturalism: The Second Oldest Dead White Men”: “[...] American graduate students who wander too far from the core, even to Spain or Italy, in search of fresh sources, often place their careers in jeopardy as departments seek to fill medieval positions with the usual suspects.” While I do think that all graduate students should work with cultural theory, I also find such disdain for language study (with the necessary training in foreign and medieval scripts, manuscript transmission, intellectual traditions, etc.) appalling and even hypocritical on the part of a scholarly community only too eager to applaud the work of, say, Edward Said. Surely we want to see future generations of medievalists equipped with the resources to tap into primary sources, both non-Western and Western. I am reminded of John Boswell’s plea at the 1993 Kalamazoo panel on the study of medieval homosexuality that students be trained to work with primary sources in order that we may someday get a fuller view of the historical record on homosexuality and not keep debating the same already published sources. Equally important, the long and yes, old-fashioned, training I am speaking of is not necessarily opposed to the development of theoretical sophistication and capacity for ideological critique. It is more likely that theoretical sophistication (quite evident these days among graduate students in literature and in younger scholars) without sufficient competence in the traditions discussed will lead to predictable and banal findings about medieval multiculturalisms or anti-multiculturalisms.

Finally, in response to the emphasis which many of the contributors place on the hostility (whether in the form of actual persecution or purely discursive) shown by medieval and early modern societies toward marginal or foreign peoples, I would argue that it is also important to record instances of survival, resistance, and adaptation among marginalized and persecuted peoples as well as recording their victimization. I have attended lectures on genocide as a discursive phenomenon by prominent scholars such as Tzetvan Todorov and Patrick Brantlinger who did not realize that the Native American peoples whom they represented as exterminated populations in fact survive and have held onto a distinct, if altered, cultural identity. How would our views on the texts and histories of conquest be changed if we knew something of the colonial and post-colonial experience from the perspective of native peoples themselves? Perhaps the more dramatic
(romanticized?) and yet simplistic narrative of genocide would be displaced by more complicated narratives of apartheid, diaspora, cultural struggle and change. We ourselves must be careful not to distort the historical record out of a desire to create counter-narratives of victimization that simply invert those critiqued in many of these commentaries. Such counter-narratives, it seems to me, too often allow the Westerner to insert her/himself yet again into a privileged position of knowledge vis-à-vis the cultural Other.

TOWARDS A COMPLETE MEDIEVAL HISTORY
Charlotte Newman Goldy, Miami University

At this January's AHA, I gave a paper calling for a comparative approach to the history of the twelfth-century English family. I argued that comparing family patterns "cross-class" (noble, town, peasant) within a particular region like England which was integrated by politics, economics, and increasingly "culture," was a better approach than our usual one of taking one group through time. I maintained that these comparisons would give us more ways to understand what affected behavior and why families formed the way they did. It could help us understand why there was a discrepancy between the ideology of the family (as voiced in the clerical and secular culture) and behavior within families, a discrepancy especially evident in the women's issues. I envisioned an analysis which included everyone: women and men, all ages, non-heirs as well as heirs, celibate relatives, and friends.

The most developed part of the paper was the argument that there were fundamental differences between twelfth-century Jewish and Christian ideologies of family: in what the relation of a family was to the religions themselves and the culture of the religions, as well as in the ideal roles assigned to some of the members of families. Since the ideologies differed, I expected to see some very different behaviors when I surveyed the literature about the Medieval Anglo-Jewish family, and I did. Yet I also noted that some behavior clearly deviated from Jewish belief and was closer to contemporary Christian behavior. Discrepancies like this allow us to understand how economic needs, gender biases, or survival needs can override religious beliefs. Putting Jewish and Christian side by side, therefore, could help us isolate what motives were religious, just as comparing town and peasant help us to isolate economic factors, or comparing noble and peasant highlight the effects of residence patterns. My great fear was that the audience would respond by saying that all this was obvious. I was wrong.

No one—not on the panel, in the audience, or in later conversation—questioned the possibility or desirability of comparison by "class" or the need to include people not traditionally included as family, but the idea of comparing Jews and Christians as individuals who lived in the same time and place met with strange responses from people I respect. In an otherwise thoughtful and positive response, the commentator remarked that she had checked some of my statements about particular Medieval Jewish rituals "by asking a Jewish friend." I find it hard to imagine this scholar checking on a Medieval Mass by asking a "Catholic friend." I was too surprised to suggest that my notes included readily available material in English. Another scholar I greatly admire privately told me