

EGGPLANT EATER!

David Nirenberg – I think I've dedicated most of my life of research to trying to understand how Islam, Christianity and Judaism use each other to think about themselves, and think about each other in order to define themselves. All kinds of aspects of our thought have taken place in this context, for example the transmission of Greek philosophy, the transmission of certain kinds of medicine or mathematics, was often through people or texts or languages that could be criticized as Arabic or Jewish! Think of Petrarch's condemnation of the Muslim doctors... Or the Inquisition's condemnation of certain kinds of thought, as Jewish or Muslim... Or even, in Modernity, the condemnation by Western philosophers, people like Hegel, of certain kinds of rationality, for example excessively abstract or excessively rationalist approaches to the world, as Jewish... And so, I'm very interested in the ways in which all our levels of thought from how we eat and dress, to the ways in which we want to classify our most abstract forms of thought, are shaped and enmeshed and embedded in this world of three religions...

Eggplants for example. In Spain, in medieval Spain, eggplant was really introduced by the Arabs, but later it came to be associated by Christians with the Jews! So for example in Christian poetry when one Christian poet wants to insult another Christian poet, and call him a "Jew," he says: "You are an eggplant-eater," or "You have eyes of eggplant!" When the Inquisition condemns someone, often a witch, for example, as she was ushered out of the church, the Christians in front of the church would throw eggplants at her or him. So, even if something as a vegetable like the eggplant can become a complex marker of cultural difference, you see how the world has been made, imagined, interpreted through thinking about the difference or the relationship between Muslim, Christian and Jew...

So for example, in the 20th century, much of the world was convinced that certain things were Jewish: capitalism was Jewish, abstract algebra was Jewish, a certain kind of ways of painting was Jewish, why, how could they be so certain? These things now we look at them as ridiculous, but at the time they were the most rational products of the most advanced thought we could produce! And the reason we can produce such thoughts is because we're not critically aware of the degree to which our religious categories are affecting how we think. The Three Religions are intertwined with each other! They want to appropriate the other, at the same time they want not to be the other! So they have to find that more complex way of including and repelling the other! Judaism is inside Islam, it's also not Islam, Islam is not Judaism, Christianity appropriates Judaism but it doesn't want to be judaized ! Rabbinic Judaism arises in the context of Early Christianity, but it wants to show its claim to the Jewish tradition as being stronger, better than, the Early Christian one... In this sense they can't do what the Greeks do, which is just say, "Go away, Barbarian, you are not of us, you are other!" There is this much more complex interplay between, well, the self and the other, which requires both appropriation and expulsion or, or even extermination...

3min 46sec