

## *The Rise of Intolerance*

by John Boswell

**SEX, DISSIDENCE AND DAMNATION: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages.** By Jeffrey Richards. Routledge. 179 pp. \$29.95

Until the middle of this century, premodern European history consisted principally of the doctrines of the Christian church and of the political and military activities of kings and aristocrats. That this added up to a severely restricted, if not grossly distorted, view of European society had become apparent by the 1940s, when this narrow text was vigorously emended by the *annalistes*, the French group of social historians who strove to retrieve from the margins of history the scribbled lives of the poor, the ordinary, the unaristocratic, the nonstrategic, the apolitical.

The *annalistes* thus prepared the way for an even more daring historical enterprise during the 1980s: the effort to recover the ideas, lives, and feelings of those not merely unimportant or overlooked in their own day but actively oppressed, silenced, or hidden from view. In recent years dozens of fine studies have focused high-intensity beams on the underside or outside or invisible inside of premodern European life: D. S. Bailey's work on homosexuality, John Noonan's splendid *Contraception*, J. B. Russell's studies of heresy and the devil, a half-dozen surveys of European Jewish life and anti-Semitism, as well as numerous recent studies of women, children, and the inner life of the family.

Synthesizing these separate studies and incorporating them into the framework of conventional history will be the enterprise of the next generation of historiographers. It will not be easy. Within each emerging subfield there are historical and epistemological controversies, many of them explosive and highly charged, which pose a problem of conflicting trajectories not unlike the quest for unity in a Europe now freed from totalitarian rule in the East but increasingly fragmented by local ethnic

and cultural animosities.

The historiography of premodern homosexuality, for example, is plagued by bitter feuding about what "gay" means and whether it is a category that existed in other times or is merely a sexual label (and understanding) peculiar to modern society. Scholarship on medieval Judaism is paralyzed by disagreement over whether anti-Semitism should be attributed to Christian theology (the traditional view), the economic role of the Jews (which seems more "scientific" but too closely related to ancient and discredited libels), or to local popular prejudices. Writings about heresy continue to struggle with the largely insoluble problem that nearly everything we know about heretics is derived from the writings of their bitterest enemies—"orthodox" Catholic clerics or Inquisitors dedicated to eradicating them—who felt no obligation to "objectivity" when describing them. The study of women is torn between old-fashioned objectivist approaches (women were excluded from power, except for a few queens and noblewomen) and radical critiques that ask, What is "power" anyway, and why does it matter? And can writers in male-dominated societies really provide unbiased answers to such questions? Such debates are useful as starting points, but they can easily derail historical inquiry before it ever gets out of the station.

Certain broad and important trends, however, have emerged. For decades most medievalists have recognized that there was a profound change in European society between the 12th and 14th centuries, from social structures one might loosely categorize as "tolerant" or "open" to much more rigid, more exclusionary, and more punitive ones. Whereas early medieval society evinced, for example, very little awareness of or concern about racial characteristics, by the later Middle Ages hostile stereotypes of "blackamoors" and other darker peoples had become motivat-

ing themes in literary works and highly effective propaganda for whipping up religious and social antagonism to Muslims. While Roman Catholics, Arian heretics, and pagans could peaceably maintain rival churches in some areas of early medieval Europe, any and all dissent was severely punished in the Europe of the High Middle Ages, and non-Catholics were branded or burned or exiled. The Jews, who had lived relatively peacefully in Europe in the millennium preceding the first Crusade (1095), were in the following four centuries physically attacked, forcibly converted, systematically exploited, and ultimately hounded out of most of Europe.

What remains mysterious in the present state of research is what occasioned this great shift. Indeed, should this shift be applied collectively to all "minority groups," or must it be understood as a set of separate historical developments, all of which *happened* to occur more or less simultaneously? At a number of conferences I have attended lately, again and again the puzzled audience has asked the speaker to speculate on what caused this shift. I have heard no convincing answer.

Enter Jeffrey Richards's *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation*. A professor of cultural history at the University of Lancaster and the author of several works on medieval Christianity, Richards would understand that shift by tracing medieval attitudes towards sex in general and toward heretics, witches, Jews, prostitutes, homosexuals, and lepers in particular. Richards acknowledges at the outset that he is attempting "an avowed work of synthesis" of materials otherwise too difficult to access or too technical for nonspecialists. Unfortunately, this appealing simplicity is bought at the cost of accuracy. Richards's book is riddled with errors such as misdating the conciliar rules against Christians eating with Jews by almost three centuries or placing the rise of ghettos in Europe about 500 years too late. Perhaps any effort to deal with problems of this complexity for all of Europe over a period of 1500 years is bound to collapse many—

too many—distinctions. Most readers would find hardly persuasive an analysis of modern Europe that lumped together sources from all countries from the early 16th to the late 20th centuries.

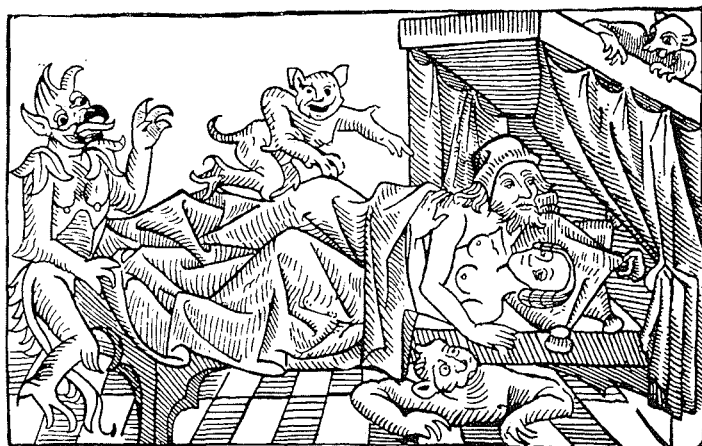
How then does Richards explain Europe's transformation from its relatively tolerant culture into what the English historian R. I. Moore has called "a persecuting society"? First, he focuses on intellectual trends, notably millenarianism, which—although the date kept being postponed—anticipated an imminent end to the world. At the center of this medieval apocalyptic worldview, Richards writes, was the need to defeat the Anti-Christ and for impure elements to be cast out before the final judgment. This apocalyptic view was intensified by a series of devastating plagues: The Black Death (1347–49) wiped out in certain places one third of the population; the plague of 1361–62 destroyed another third. Someone had to be blamed, Richards says, and "there were wild bursts of hysterical scapegoatism which culminated in horrific massacres of Jews."

Richards's explanations, while expressing commonly accepted stereotypes of the Middle Ages, hardly bear close examination. Millenarianism cannot have had much impact on the masses, who had no idea what year it was. And although the plagues' effects were disastrous, they post-date, by and large, the shift in question.

The real cause of medieval paranoia was, in all probability, economic. One of the few clear features in the notoriously treacherous and unmapped economic landscape of premodern Europe is a general decline beginning in the 13th century—almost exactly coincident with the rise of prejudice and hostility toward Jews, gay people, Muslims, racial minorities, and women in positions of power. Inflation soared out of control (despite royal edicts to control it); land values rose astronomically, making it more and more difficult to support a family. Real wages dropped and food production leveled off; famine became common in many areas, leaving the population much less resistant to ordinary illness and wholly defenseless before the

plague. It was almost certainly the perception that the world was "going to hell" on a daily basis that provoked Europeans to look at those who might be going to hell in an eschatological scheme as a possible cause of their problems. Once it had been established that Jews or sodomites were the source of general anguish and suffering, it required a generous soul or a perspicacious mind to resist efforts to punish or eradicate them.

Although Richards describes the paranoia that created a need for scapegoats, he does not at all explain the moral, social, scientific, or aesthetic taxonomy that identified and determined who the scapegoats should be. Richards perpetuates the naive



idea that the intolerance of Christian society corresponds somehow to a theological program. It was, however, popes, high-ranking prelates, and Christian kings—those in authority in "Christian" Europe—who most consistently opposed, condemned, and punished anti-Semitic outbreaks. The Church always shrank officially from imposing physical punishment on heretics. And in the eyes of the scholastics who formulated Catholic sexual doctrine, masturbation was morally equivalent to homosexual behavior, and some common heterosexual activities were even worse than most same-sex acts. So why would the "Christian" populace kill or forcibly convert Jews in the face of explicit condemnations and even severe punish-

ment by Christian leaders? Why would the Spanish Inquisition ignore papal excommunication of its officials to enforce its bloody vision of religious orthodoxy? Why would most European states enact death penalties for homosexual acts but impose no sanctions whatever against masturbation or theologically comparable nonprocreative heterosexual activities?

Not having proposed these questions, it is hardly surprising that Richards has no answers to them. One possible explanation, however, is that the program of repression resulted from popular *misunderstandings* of Christian theology, not from faithful implementation of Church policy. Today, in an age of much greater literacy,

only a minority of modern Catholics can accurately distinguish between the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth. Richards himself misunderstands many of the niceties of medieval Christian morality. He claims, for example, that Dante "consigned homosexuals to the Seventh Level of Hell." Anyone who reads the entire *Divine Comedy* knows that the group of persons unmistakably punished for homosexual sodomy are to be found

in the seventh terrace of Purgatory, the spot nearest to Paradise in Dante's schema. These "sodomites" stand just outside the gates of heaven, on the terrace of those guilty of too much love, above the great masses of humanity gathered on the six terraces of Purgatory and nine circles of Hell, and this bespeaks a much greater ambivalence and complexity in Dante's (and his audience's?) attitude than Richards admits or apparently even notices. Possibly Dante's audience, like Richards, read Catholic moral teachings carelessly, and was more apt to recall an association of homosexuality with damnation than to remember that sexual sins are much less serious than most other kinds of sins. Within a century of *The Divine Comedy*,

Italian states would be hanging those guilty of homosexual offenses, while the vast majority of the human failings that Dante and other moral theologians catalogued—and ranked more grievous—would pass unnoticed or at least unpunished by the same Christian society.

This leads almost ineluctably to the suspicion that something else, something less analytical and more visceral, motivated the sudden increase of intolerance. Here the historian may yield to other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, more capable of testing and reporting on how humans decide which variations from the norm—as they perceive it—constitute desirable rarity (exceptional athletic ability, uncommon virtue, unusual hair color), which are unimportant (lack of religious belief, low sex drive, peculiar culinary tastes), and which are threatening or sinister (the “wrong” religious beliefs, minority sexual preferences, dark skin color). Historians can only inform such researchers that these norms are not constant in human populations and that there is dramatic change in periods like the later Middle Ages where one can study these shifts actually happening.

There may be, ultimately, no satisfactory answer to the question that underlies Richards’s muddled text: What was the

dark force that turned Europe from the diverse and relatively tolerant mixture of cultures and peoples of the early Middle Ages into the fanatical, narrow-minded rigidity of the later Middle Ages? The problem yields to analytical scrutiny no more readily than the more recent and familiar horrors of the Holocaust. When the many proffered explanations have been adduced, compared, and added up, the evil seems inexplicably greater than their sum, and one yearns to view its perpetrators as mindless minions of some clear-cut, irresistible devil rather than persons like us, caught in a complex interaction of cultural, social, and economic pressures. By looking for a simple explanation, we are in a way recreating precisely what they did—looking for a scapegoat—and we would learn a more valuable lesson from history by accepting the dismaying, uncontrollable complexity of human existence and remaining determined to be decent, humane, and compassionate in spite of it.

—John Boswell is chairman of the history department of Yale University and the author of *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (1989).

## *What’s Really Wrong with the University*

by Denis Donoghue

**THREE RIVAL VERSIONS OF MORAL ENQUIRY.** By Alasdair MacIntyre. Univ. of Notre Dame. 241 pp. \$24.95

It is well known, but perhaps not well understood, that American colleges and universities have again become noisy places. Not noisy or violent as they were in the Vietnam years: There is no sign of blood in the classroom or the cafeteria, or of demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes. But there is a good deal of irritation in the corridors, and there is a lot of resentment.

Think of the feelings aroused by such considerations as gender, race, “the canon,” authority, feminism, “aesthetic ideology.”

I am not sure that I can contribute much enlightenment to any of these issues. But I have been doing a little reading in their vicinity and have been thinking about the current situation in higher education generally, so far as I have any sense of it.

One of the books I have been reading is Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. MacIntyre’s conclusions