

# Mediterranean Crossings

Sexual Transgressions in Islam and Christianity  
(10<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

*edited by Umberto Grassi*

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## Sexual Transgressions: A Mediterranean Perspective

### 1. *Mediterranean sexuality?*

The idea of a “Mediterranean sexuality” has played a fundamental role in the construction of an “essentialist” vision of the populations that have inhabited this geographical area over the centuries. The work of the eclectic explorer, writer and soldier Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was a crucial step in the formalisation of this stereotype in the modern period. Burton was the author of a complete translation of the *Arabian Nights*, a work that, in his rather free and deliberately titillating rendition, has for a long time fed the orientalist fantasies of Europeans about the Muslim world. In the concluding essay, inserted at the end of the tenth volume, Burton included the most famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographic synopsis on homoerotic practices around the world. Although Burton believed that homosexual attraction was universally found within human societies around the globe, he identified a geographical area, which he renamed the “Sotadic Zone” (after the Alexandrian poet Sotades, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), that, due to its climatic and environmental characteristics, he argued, favoured the generalised and endemic spread of this form of desire. In his reconstruction, this strip lay between the 30<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> parallels of the northern hemisphere, thus including parts of the Mediterranean area, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, Afghanistan and a portion of India, China, Japan and Turkistan. In Burton’s view, masculine and feminine characteristics mixed within the inhabitants of this geographical area, creating an ambiguous blend that, more than in other areas of the world, favoured homosexual desire. Although the author specified that his model was not based upon racial but on climatic assumptions, his entire treatise relied upon an uncertain limbo in which climatic determinism and the biological plan were deeply intertwined.<sup>1</sup> As we will see, these assumptions had their roots in a distant past. Aiming to shed light on an aspect of this prolonged history, this volume will focus on the analysis of sexual and gender non-conformity across the imaginary and physical boundaries that divided the Muslim and Christian Mediterranean.

1. Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918*, New York, New York University Press, 1995, pp. 216-219. See the reprint of this section of the *Terminal Essay: Richard F. Burton, The Sotadic Zone*, Boston, Longwood Press, 1977.

In this context, we aim to respond to a set of questions that move way beyond Burton's classificatory intentions: what were the commonalities and differences in how sexual morality was dealt with in Christian Europe and Muslim North Africa? Did proscribed sexuality play any role in the larger processes of religious crossing, hybridisation and conversion between the two faiths? What contributions can the history of transgressive sexualities make to a broader history of the Mediterranean as a subject of historical inquiry?

Although we cannot offer linear responses to any of these questions, their relevance is better understood when we appreciate the role the Mediterranean has played in the recent transnational and global historiographical turn. The pressing issues of today have placed the validity of a history centred exclusively on the dimension of the nation-state in crisis.<sup>2</sup> Over time, the study of world history<sup>3</sup> has developed alongside and been supplemented by a variety of approaches that have placed transnational or interconnected<sup>4</sup> and entangled<sup>5</sup> disciplinary fields at the centre of their research and of their theoretical and methodological reflections. In recent years, work on the Mediterranean area has played a decisive role in this shift. This interest is driven by multiple factors. Since ancient times, the Mediterranean has been a crossroads of cultures. Its seas have been traversed by men, merchandise, artistic products, scientific and technological innovations, philosophical theories and literary genres, but also, and not least, by contagious diseases, warships and slave ships. The powerfully hybrid nature of the Mediterranean region continues to attract the interest of a society that today finds itself increasingly pressed to respond to the challenges posed by multiculturalism, immigration and processes of cultural and ethnic hybridisation.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the Mediterranean remains a "hot" area marked by religious and cultural conflicts that, today, continue to be re-read and inserted by historians into political agendas that often sit in stark contrast to each other.<sup>7</sup>

2. I would like to thank Vincenzo Lavenia (Università di Bologna) and Stefano Villani (University of Maryland) for their feedback and suggestions in the writing of this introduction. My gratitude also goes to Viviana Tagliaferro, who shared the drafts of her forthcoming review articles on the Mediterranean as a category of historical analysis with me, as they have been a precious source of inspiration for this work.

3. For an introduction, see Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016. For gender studies in a global perspective, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Malden (MA) and Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

4. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Exploration in Connected History: From the Tagus to Ganges*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be Alien: Travails in the Early Modern World*, Waltham (MA), Brandeis University Press, 2011; Serge Gruzinski, *Quelle heure est-il là-bas?*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

5. A seminal text is Michel Espagne, *Transferts: les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Editions recherche sur les civilisations, 1998.

6. Refer to the excellent introduction in the manual by Monique O'Connell, Eric R. Dursteler, *The Mediterranean World: From the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Napoleon*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, p. 3.

7. An outstanding case is Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Braudel's classic, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*,<sup>8</sup> established the Mediterranean as a subject of historical research. The ambitiousness of his project garnered some (well-founded) criticism, but for quite some time the vastness of the horizons he sought to conceptualise also deterred other scholars from making their own forays into this field of research and proposing new methods that might better address the challenges.<sup>9</sup> Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2000)<sup>10</sup> played a fundamental role in reviving the historiographical debate on the Mediterranean, and the scholarly contributions that followed their work have been numerous.<sup>11</sup> The authors of these studies have questioned what it is that defines the Mediterranean as an object of historical investigation: what are the dominant features of this territory? Are there specific cultural traits shared between the cultures and civilisations on its shores, which are otherwise divided on religious, political and institutional grounds? Criticism of any idea of "Mediterraneanness" has emerged above all in the field of anthropology, particularly in the work of Michael Herzfeld, who questioned

8. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1949. The English edition, which came much later, represents a substantial revision of the original: Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. by Siân Reynolds, London, Collins, 1972-1973.

9. On the historiographical debate on *La Méditerranée*, see: Eric R. Dursteler, "Fernand Braudel (1902-1985)", in *French Historians 1900-2000: New Historical Writing in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. by Philip Daileader and Philip Whalen, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 62-76; *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World, 1600-1800*, ed. by Gabriel Piterberg, Teofilo F. Ruiz and Geoffrey Symcox, Toronto and Los Angeles, University of Toronto Press, 2010; *Trade and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, ed. by Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood and Mohamed-Salah Omri, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2010; Peregrine Horden, "Mediterranean Excuses: Historical Writing on the Mediterranean since Braudel", *History and Anthropology*, 16/1 (2005), pp. 25-30. I wish to thank Stefano Villani and Viviana Tagliaferro for their contributions in the conception of this historiographical synthesis.

10. Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.

11. The field is vast, and it is impossible to offer a complete bibliography. We will cite just several of the most significant works: *Bibliographie du monde méditerranéen. Relations et échanges (1454-1835)*, ed. by Alain Blondy, Paris, Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne, 2003; *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. by William V. Harris, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean 1550-1870: A Geohistorical Approach*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; *Il Mediterraneo delle città. Scambi, confronti, culture, rappresentazioni*, ed. by Franco Salvatori, Rome, Viella, 2008; Eric R. Dursteler, "On Bazaars and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts", *Journal of Early Modern History*, 15/5 (2011), pp. 413-434; *War, Trade and Neutrality: Europe and the Mediterranean in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. by Antonella Alimento, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011; *David Abulafia, Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London, Allen Lane, 2011; *Mediterranean Identities in the Premodern Era: Entrepôts, Islands, Empires (Transculturalisms, 1400-1700)*, ed. by John Watkins and Kathryn L. Reyerson, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014. The publication of historical journals on this theme is also notable, including *Mediterranean Historical Review*, *The Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, and the Italian periodical *Mediterranea – ricerche storiche*.

the idea of a “Mediterranean identity”, judging it to be a northern European construct imbued with stereotypes that the very inhabitants of the Mediterranean area have contributed to reinforce and sustain.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, another approach is that adopted by David Abulafia, who refused to take hinterlands into consideration and limited himself to the maritime arena and the exchanges that took place therein. He focused instead on the human affairs for which the sea was a backdrop and facilitator, analysing the process through which this expanse of water became an integrated cultural, commercial and sometimes political space. Abulafia nevertheless highlighted how this integration has always been subject to crises and conflicts, emphasising the importance of human choice and rejecting every form of environmental determinism.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Horden and Purcell, in their methodological proposal, sustained a view of the unity and complexity of the area, linking both to the jagged geography of the coasts and the lands surrounding them. In their convincing interpretation, the fragmented topography and its high degree of productive specialisation have, in fact, made the relationships and commercial exchanges in this area almost inevitable.<sup>14</sup>

The study of unconventional sexualities opens new research prospects in this field. As we have seen from Burton’s theories, ideas of sexuality and “Mediterraneanness” were strictly intertwined. The Mediterranean was a site of eroticised fantasies that, however, overflowed the realm of the imagination to carry deep political implications. The importance of sexual stereotypes in the construction of 19<sup>th</sup>-century racial rhetoric is well known. The violent expansion of the major European industrial powers between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a direct consequence of economic logic, but it also included ideological factors. The myth of national strength and prestige also found new outlets in territorial conquests that did not endanger (at least not directly) the fragile balance of the borders across the Old Continent. This process, which had high human and economic costs, required a form of intellectual justification, and the nascent biological theories of race provided much-needed support, granting (pseudo-)scientific merit to the colonial expansion program.<sup>15</sup>

The result was an affirmation of ideas regarding the necessary “civilising” function of Western powers, which, because of their moral and intellectual superiority, had the “obligation” to educate populations that were believed to sit lower on the evolutionary scale. Scientific observation of the sexual behaviour of colonised populations further contributed to the justification of Western domination. The field of anthropology benefitted greatly from the new horizons

12. Michael Herzfeld, “The Horns of the Mediterranean Dilemma”, *American Ethnologist*, 11 (1984), pp. 439-454.

13. Abulafia, *Great Sea*.

14. Horden, Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*.

15. Ann L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and the Colonial Order of Things*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995. On colonialism and sexuality, see also Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1990. On Orientalism and homosexuality, see Joseph A. Boone, *Orientalism and Homosexuality*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.

opened up by the conquests. Non-European peoples became a subject of study, and their religions, customs, traditions, physical forms and mental habits were all observed and documented in light of the classificatory impulse that remained one of the most decisive features of 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific discourses.<sup>16</sup>

The construction of racial theories in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was located within a specific social and cultural context. For a long time, historians have denied that “race” can be used as a descriptive category for phenomena that took place before the crystallisation of the modern biological explanatory model. However, recent historiography has challenged these assumptions. These “teleological” interpretations considered race a stable, rigid category that has materialised in “singular, static forms”.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, ideas of fluidity and instability have now been largely accepted and are understood to be one of the main reasons for the adaptability and periodic emergence of racial discourses in different historical and social contexts.<sup>18</sup> In medieval and early modern Europe, religious labels often assumed a more or less explicit racialised undertone. If we focus on how these discourses served the purpose of structuring and managing human differences, then rather than emphasising their substantive content, we can use “race” in a historical perspective as a “relational” and “contingent” category whose “instrumentality is enhanced precisely because it can be construed as either lodged in the body (nature) or in culture”.<sup>19</sup>

In late medieval and early modern Spain, anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric gave birth to racialised religious stereotypes that exercised an enduring influence in shaping the terms by which Christians in Europe referred to non-Christians. David Nirenberg has argued that, even outside the interpretative framework of evolutionary biology and genetics, historians are authorised to use the word “race” to describe the process by which Jews and then Muslims were marginalised and later, though at different times, expelled from the kingdom. Nirenberg’s analysis is enriched by his discussion on the use of the word “raça”, which already in some of its contemporary applications seemed to allude to a form of biological inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

16. Jean-Raphaël Bourge, “Colonialismo, omosessualità e mondo islamico nell’immaginario erotico europeo tra Otto e Novecento”, in *Le trasgressioni della carne. Il desiderio omosessuale nel mondo islamico e cristiano, secc. XII-XX*, ed. by Umberto Grassi and Giuseppe Marcocci, Rome, Viella, 2015, pp. 187-203.

17. Jonathan Burton, “Race”, in *A Cultural History of Western Empires*, vol. 3, *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance*, ed. by Ania Loomba, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 203-228: 215.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Traub, “Sexuality”, in *A Cultural History of Western Empires*, vol. 3, *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance*, pp. 147-180: 152. See also: Geraldine Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle Ages”, *Literature Compass*, 8/5 (2011), pp. 258-274; and Ania Loomba, “Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique”, *New Literary History*, 40/3 (2009), pp. 501-522.

20. David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 169-190. Margo Hendricks was a pioneer in promoting the use of the category of “race” in premodern history: Margo Hendricks, “Race: A Renaissance Category?”, in *Companion to English Renaissance*

The process of the “naturalisation” of the differences between Christians and religious minorities in Spain was not, however, in Nirenberg’s interpretation, a fruit of the distance between cultures, but rather of their excessive proximity. In fact, it was after an explosion of anti-Jewish violence in 1391, when many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity, that the presence of new converts began to raise ancestral anxieties. Those who were different, the potential enemy, “the other”, were now mixed in with the Christian majority. It was in this context that the problem of genealogy became fundamental. The policies of *limpieza de sangre* (“blood purity”), which sought to establish who the descendants of Christians were so as to exclude new converts from certain occupations, trades and relevant institutional positions, fueled this process. Blood and descent became determining factors in conveying cultural belonging and the transmission of religious values. A “new Christian” could never be equated with a “Christian by nature”.<sup>21</sup> It then became crucial to identify the signs that distinguished the potential enemy. Unregulated sexuality, and in particular the practice of sodomy, was permanently associated in the collective imagination with the infidel who was potentially dangerous to society.

## 2. Race and sexuality

Vincenzo Lavenia’s essay in this volume analyses how sexual themes have been intertwined with anti-Muslim rhetoric since the late Middle Ages, and how this combination had large consequences in driving the inquisitorial persecution of Muslims, both converts and non-converts, across the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, the essay ends by indicating how this model was subsequently exported overseas and how it influenced travel literature, which drew upon this cultural heritage. However, anti-Muslim rhetoric was not the only lens through which Iberian observers scrutinised and interpreted the customs and habits of the populations they encountered along the paths of their foreign expansion. During their “conquests”, xenophobia and marginalisation, which had previously been configured upon a primarily religious basis, were selectively re-purposed to confront new political and cultural contexts. Classic models exerted an equally decisive influence. In ancient times, Greeks and Romans had identified “barbarians” with a monstrous

*Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Hattaway, Oxford and Malden (MA), Blackwell, 2001, pp. 690-698. See the recent contribution by Geraldine Heng, *Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

21. *Ibid.* The debate on the proto-racialisation of ethnic and religious minorities in Spain has a long history: Jerome Friedman, “Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 18/1 (1987), pp. 3-30; John Edwards, “The Beginnings of a Scientific Theory of Race? Spain, 1450-1600”, in *From Iberia to Diaspora: Studies in Sephardic History and Culture*, ed. by Yedida K. Stillman and Norman A. Stillman, Leiden, Brill, 1999; *Race and Blood in the Iberian World*, ed. by Max S. Hering Torres, María Elena Martínez and David Nirenberg, Zurich and Berlin, Lit, 2012. The issue is also debated in *After Conversion: Iberia and the Emergence of Modernity*, ed. by Mercedes García-Arenal, Leiden, Brill, 2016.

and unregulated sexuality.<sup>22</sup> One of the models that contributed most to the ongoing “sexualisation” of the fear aroused by the foreigner in Western culture was the repertoire of monstrous races contained in Pliny’s *Natural History*.<sup>23</sup>

As already argued by Rudi C. Bleys<sup>24</sup> and, more recently, by Carmen Nocentelli,<sup>25</sup> Christians’ relationships first with Jews and Muslims and then with non-European populations profoundly changed the perception of sexuality in the Western world: it prepared the ground for an understanding of sexual behaviour that moved beyond theologically-based moral categories. The belief that some ethnic groups were more prone to vice than others gradually shifted the axis of reflection on sexuality from moralistic thought to naturalistic investigation. Greek and Roman medicine had already assumed a similar perspective in its considerations of the organic causes of homosexual desire, and a continuity was maintained in European medieval commentaries on classical texts.<sup>26</sup> However, when this theoretical debate came to be conflated with proto-anthropological reflections on non-European peoples, the process accelerated and helped formulate the image of the sexual deviant, even within European societies, as belonging to a “species” unto himself. This intertwining is particularly evident in 16<sup>th</sup>-century reflections on female homoerotic desire. In his *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573), Ambroise Paré (1510-1590), one of the most influential European physicians and surgeons of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, listed the anomalies of the female genitalia, which he observed sometimes had an outgrowth of the lips so prominent that they reacted to erotic stimulations, such as an erect penis. In the second edition of the work (1575), he enriched his list with a description of the diviners of Fez.<sup>27</sup> This passage was taken almost literally from the French translation of Leo Africanus’ *Description of Africa* (1550).<sup>28</sup> The paragraph was a compendium of recurrent themes from

22. Joseph Roisman, “Greek and Roman Ethnosexuality”, in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. by Thomas K. Hubbard, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 405-423.

23. Traub, “Sexuality”, p. 152.

24. Bleys, *Geography of Perversion*.

25. Carmen Nocentelli, *Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

26. Joan Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

27. “Female diviners of Fez” were women who, “claiming to be possessed by *djinn*s or demons, foretold the future or served as healers”. Leo Africanus (see note 28 below) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century describes them as *suhāqiyat*: “(*sahacat*, as he transliterated into Italian the current Arabic word for ‘tribade’, lesbian) women who had the ‘evil custom’ of ‘rubbing’ (*fregare*) each other in sexual delight. Assuming the voices of demons, they lured beautiful women into their lascivious company, singing, dancing, and having sex with them, enticing them to trick their husbands along the way”. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2006, p. 201.

28. Umberto Grassi, *Sodoma. Una storia dell’omosessualità (V-XVIII sec.)*, Rome, Carocci, 2019, pp. 129-131. Leo Africanus was an eminent Arab geographer born in Granada around 1485 with the name al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān. Captured by pirates, he became a Christian and was baptised in Rome, and then he returned to Africa and re-embraced Islam. Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges*, ed. by Jean Céard, Geneva, Droz, 1971 (or. pub. 1585), pp. 26-27, and Leo Africanus, *Historiale Description de l’Afrique*, 2 vols, Lyon,

the debates on female same-sex desire. Paré, following Leone, had defined the fortune-tellers of Fez as *fricatrices*, a Latin term that indicated the rubbing of the female genital organs and which was often accompanied by the classic descriptions of the “tribade”.<sup>29</sup> Classical literature and travel reports also influenced medical treatises. They helped determine how, in the new discipline of anatomy, the study of the physical forms of the female genitalia and their anomalies contributed to the revival of the classic figure of the “tribade”, which influenced the ways in which female homoeroticism has been interpreted and understood in the Western world until very recently.<sup>30</sup>

Notions derived from Galenic humoral theories also reinforced naturalised interpretations of cultural differences. It was commonly believed that temperate climates favoured a balance between moods and, consequently, the development of balanced complexions. On the other hand, those who lived in equatorial or torrid areas were believed to be characterised by more unstable complexions and to be more inclined to abandon themselves to the passions. “Within this framework”, Valerie Traub wrote, “inhabitants of southern climes were considered more prone to sexual ‘excess’ of various sorts”.<sup>31</sup> Burton’s theories on the “Sotadic zone”, with which we opened this introduction, thus had their roots in a very distant time.

### 3. *Islam, Christianity and sexuality: conflicts and interactions*

Along with assumptions of a religion-based race, the suspicion that surrounded sexual relations between Christians and non-Christians was exported to colonial territories and crystallised in rigid proscriptive formulas. In many circumstances, however, pragmatic needs led to the tolerance of, and sometimes incited, interethnic and interreligious mixings. In the colonial context, the idea that men could not do without the sexual outlet they found in native women was widely accepted. But the exchange of women was also often used as a lubricant to foster peaceful relations between the conquerors and occupied populations. Although colonial empires grew on different timelines, the increasingly strict rules formulated to control interactions within them were not implemented at the start of the expansion but occurred in a

J. Temporal, 1556/1557, vol. 1, pp. 161-162. Both works are quoted in Katharine Park, “The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570-1620”, in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by David Hillman and Carla Mazzi, New York and London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 171-193: 171. On Leo Africanus, see Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels*.

29. According to recent research, the reemergence of the theme of tribadism in European mental horizons can be located in the Italian humanistic culture of the 1470s: Marc Schachter, “Alcuni anelli mancanti del discorso lesbico: i primi commenti a stampa sopra Giovenale”, in *Tribadi, sodomiti, invertite e invertiti, pederasti, femmine, ermafroditi. Per una storia dell’omosessualità, della bisessualità e delle trasgressioni di genere in Italia*, ed. by Umberto Grassi, Vincenzo Lagioia and Gian Paolo Romagnani, Pisa, ETS, 2017, pp. 29-40: 30-31.

30. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 197-203.

31. Traub, “Sexuality”, p. 154.

phase of consolidation, mainly in response to the need to define the status of the offspring generated from mixed relationships.<sup>32</sup>

Despite strict prohibitions, in the Mediterranean area, too, sexual relations played a crucial role in determining both the construction of borders between faiths and ethnic groups and their intrinsic instability and permeability. Much work has already been done on the analysis of interreligious marriages, concubinage, prostitution and female conversions.<sup>33</sup> But other areas of human sexuality, such as female and male homosexuality, still need to be explored from this perspective.

This volume is an initial foray in this direction. The first part, entitled “Definition and Proscription”, examines cultural, social, legal and institutional attitudes towards female and male homosexual desire in the medieval and early modern Muslim and Christian worlds. Serena Tolino’s essay, which opens the section, explores ideas of female same-sex desire through the analysis of texts produced within three different Arabic literary genres: lexicography, medical treatises and legal discourses. Although the history of homosexuality in the Muslim world has recently been the subject of growing interest, especially in the Anglo-American academic world,<sup>34</sup> the issue of female homosexual desire and practices still leaves much to be explored. Its study is particularly difficult due to the scarcity of sources.<sup>35</sup> However, Tolino underlines the existence of certain basic attitudes towards the practice, which, moreover, also find echo in western Christian Europe. Here as in the Muslim world, sex, viewed in official texts from an exclusively androcentric perspective, was difficult to conceive of and was considered irrelevant if it did not involve penetration. Lesbianism was therefore interpreted exclusively in terms of “absence”, and it only became relevant when the use of artifices, such as a dildo, or particular natural conditions made it possible for women to penetrate each other.<sup>36</sup> The Arabophone world studied by Tolino,

32. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

33. See the bibliography in ch. 6.

34. *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Society*, ed. by Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer, New York, Haworth Press, 1992; *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. by J.W. Wright and Everett K. Rowson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997; Walter G. Andrews, Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2005; Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005; Dror Ze’evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006; Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2007; *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard University Press, 2008; *Islam and Homosexuality*, ed. by Samar Habib, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2010; Jolanda Guardi, Anna Vanzan, *Che genere di Islam. Omosessuali, queer e transessuali tra shari’a e nuove interpretazioni*, Rome, Ediesse, 2012.

35. For the bibliography on female homoeroticism in the Muslim world, see the notes in Tolino’s chapter in this volume.

36. On the “insignificance” of lesbian desire in the Christian context, see: Valerie Traub, “The (In)significance of ‘Lesbian’ Desire”, in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. by Jonathan Goldberg, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 61-83; Patricia Simons,

however, presents fundamental differences when compared to the Christian West. The norm/deviation binary appears, in fact, to be more complex and articulated. Different norms coexisted without ceasing to be considered “norms”, even within the same social groups. This attitude is reflected in both alcohol consumption and (especially male) homoeroticism. While both were prohibited from a legal perspective, they were widely celebrated in poetry and literature. However, this was not a contradiction, since it was assumed that different registers, with their internal regulatory regimes, were used across different genres.

Similarly, this attention to the articulation of literary genres is the cornerstone of Selim Kuru’s analysis, who also observes a fundamental discrepancy between normative texts and literary production. As in the Arabic-speaking context that Tolino examines, homosexual love played a central role in Turkish-Anatolian literature between the medieval and early modern periods, although in both cultural spheres attention to male homoerotic desire was incomparably greater than representations of female same-sex love. As Kuru points out, its importance grew from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, particularly in the genres of lyric poetry and verse narratives. The composition of lyric poems addressed to young lovers was the subject of competition among members of the Ottoman educated elite and, in particular, of those men of letters who occupied a place in the bureaucracy. The originality of Kuru’s argument lies in the link he forges between this theme and novel developments within certain specific literary genres, which, in close relationship with the topic of same-sex love, underwent radical changes in form and content. These new trends lasted over time and left an imprint on certain expressions of Turkish-Anatolian literature that survived into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From that time onwards, however, growing contacts with European powers in full colonial expansion radically changed the intellectual landscape of the Ottoman Empire<sup>37</sup> and, as other authors have pointed out,<sup>38</sup> of the Muslim world as a whole.

It is important to underline the significance of this historical turning point for a deeper understanding of the role that sexuality has played in Christian-Muslim interactions. The theme of homoerotic love, and in particular the praise of beautiful young boys, actually transcended the limits of the Turkish-Anatolian cultural area and constituted a central literary topos in Arabic and Persian productions as well. The representability of same-sex love, which acted as a counterbalance to the religious and criminal condemnation of homosexual acts, reveals how homoerotic desire was considered in the Muslim world to be a constitutive component of human psychology. In fact, it was worthy of being celebrated in fine lyric poems and in compositions that had mystical and religious themes. Contemplation on the beauty

“Lesbian (In)visibility in Italian Renaissance Culture”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 27/1 (1994), pp. 81-122; Fernanda Alfieri, “Impossibili unioni di uguali. L’amore fra donne nel discorso teologico e giuridico (secoli XVI-XVIII)”, *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, 2 (2012), pp. 105-125.

37. Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*.

38. See also: Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

of a young man was often the basis from which the authors rose to contemplate the beauty of creation and, through it, the goodness of God himself.<sup>39</sup>

This tradition was completely eliminated and censored with the increasing influence of Western Europe in the Muslim world from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when colonialism and imperialism led European powers to adopt an increasingly aggressive policy of expansion in Africa and the Middle East. What might appear paradoxical in the eyes of a contemporary observer, especially at a time when the LGBTQI+ civil rights theme is often used to justify anti-Muslim rhetoric,<sup>40</sup> is that the progressive disappearance of (mainly male) homosexual themes from the literary canon of Muslim countries was the result of contacts with Europeans over the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Still further, its most avid supporters included representatives of Western-inspired modernist trends between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. From this perspective, the genesis of religious radicalism and the “backwardness” of the Muslim world should be rethought in a different key than that presented in public debate. Indeed, it should be considered a reaction to the growing influence of Western culture and the conflicts that emerged during that process, rather than as the exclusive result of internal and endemic elements of “backwardness”.

Lavenia’s essay takes us to the other shore of the Mediterranean. As already mentioned, the author analyses the relationships between sexuality and Islamophobia in the Iberian cultural context. It is clear that in Christian Europe between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period homosexual desire did not find space for expression in the official literature comparable to that enjoyed in the Islamic world.<sup>41</sup> As we have already mentioned, cultural differences crystallised on the European side in the creation of a powerful anti-Muslim stereotype, in which the accusation of “indecent” behavior, and above all of sodomy, played a central role.<sup>42</sup>

39. See, among others: Wright, Rowson, *Homoeroticism*; Murray, Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*; El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*; Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*.

40. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism and Queer Times*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2003.

41. If not in some niche areas. For the medieval period, see: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980 (although his thesis on the ample diffusion of tolerance towards homosexual practices in the medieval period has been strongly reduced, the work remains a point of reference for the abundance of the sources cited therein). For the early modern period, within openly dissenting environments, see Randolph Trumbach, “Erotic Fantasy and Male Libertinism in Enlightenment England”, in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origin of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. by Lynn Hunt, New York, Zone Books, 1993, pp. 253-282.

42. Despite these differences, we must not forget that in the conceptualisation of homosexual practices in Western Europe a major role was played by the influx of themes borrowed from the classical world, in particular philosophy, the medical tradition, and astrology. In these environments, the mediation of the Muslim world was fundamental. At the same time, literary themes also crossed the borders of the Muslim and Christian worlds. See, for example: Sahar Amer, “Lesbian Sex and the Military: From the Medieval Arabic Tradition to French Literature”, in *Same Sex Love and Desire*

If the first part of the volume focuses on regulatory systems and cultural perceptions, the second part, “Interactions”, leads us to social practices and exchanges. The essay by Lavenia already highlighted the centrality of the Iberian world in studies on the conflicting interactions between Muslims and Christians.<sup>43</sup> The special role occupied by this region is also at the center of Tomás Mantecón Movellán’s contribution on Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it continues with Luiz Mott, who explores homosexual relations between Muslims and Christians in the Lusitanian world and in North Africa between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing on moriscos and “renegades” (that is, Christians who converted to Islam). It then ends with my essay on the multiple conversions of a woman who was condemned to death as a result of her relationships (which were never sealed by marriage) with Muslim and Jewish partners in Sicily, at that time a territory of the Crown of Spain.

The key to this second part is to understand the role played by proscribed sexuality and unconventional gender performances in relationships between religious minorities and majorities in the early modern Mediterranean. For this purpose, a micro-historical approach has been chosen, one attentive to punctual connections and documented relationships.<sup>44</sup>

Historians have already made some significant contributions in this direction. Although *The Age of Beloveds* (2005)<sup>45</sup> is a predominantly comparative work, Walter G. Andrews and Mehemet Kalpakli nevertheless also offered insights for the study of concrete relations between Muslims and Christians in the early modern period. Due to the Muslim prohibition on alcohol consumption, Christian and Jewish wine sellers were in fact the main animators of the pleasure industry in the city of Istanbul. The verses and prose texts that celebrated transgressions in the taverns and cafes of the Galata district praised the beauty of young Western men, especially the French, who were considered one of the main attractions of the neighborhood. Their immorality garnered both disapproval and intrigue.<sup>46</sup> As Andrews and Kalpakli wrote,

*among Women in the Middle Ages*, Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 179-198. On the medical literature, see the references in Leah DeVun, “Erecting Sex: Hermaphrodites and the Medieval Science of Surgery”, *Osiris*, 30 (2015), pp. 17-37.

43. One study that is very careful with regards to the themes of gender and sexuality is *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. by Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1999.

44. On the use of a microhistorical approach in world history, in addition to Trivellato, *Familiarity of Stranges*, see Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?”, *Californian Italian Studies*, 2/1 (2011), at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>. This approach has already been very fruitful. See Mercedes García-Arenal, Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe*, trans. Martin Beagles, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003; Linda Colley, *Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*, New York, Anchor Books, 2008.

45. Andrews, Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds*. The first cafes were founded around the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*, pp. 70-71). The subculture that developed around these places, in taverns, saunas and brothels were the targets of the increasing legislative control of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that, however, had fluctuating effects (*ibid.*, pp. 281-288).

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-73.

If Istanbul of the sixteenth century seems distant from Europe and the life of European society, this is more a product of our own myopia and the blind spots of scholarship than a representation of Ottoman realities. For Ottoman Istanbulites, Europe was always just a boat ride away, and Muslims seem to have caroused with, loved and had sexual relations with European on a regular basis.<sup>47</sup>

Other studies on Islamic homosexuality have occasionally unearthed interreligious homosexual ties. The theme of the handsome Christian, the *tarsā baĉeh* (literally the “fearful child”), is a literary topos that was widely diffuse in both classical Persian and Arabic literature. It was already present in the works of Abū Nuwās, a famous poet from the early Abbasid period who lived between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Christian era, but it was mainly developed in the verse texts of the great 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet ‘Aṭṭār.<sup>48</sup> Evidence for Muslims’ predilection for Jews and Christians is also found in Franz Rosenthal’s studies,<sup>49</sup> while the theme of love for a Christian boy, which drives a pious Muslim crazy with longing and leads him to madness and apostasy, is a recurring plot in the Persian and Arabic literature analysed by Paul Sprachman.<sup>50</sup> Norman Roth’s pioneering research identified Muslim Spain as a particularly fertile ground for studies on interreligious homoeroticism. Here, Muslim authors wrote occasional poems in praise of young Christians and Jews, and Jewish poets celebrated, albeit in a less explicit language, the beauty of Arab boys.<sup>51</sup>

The majority of these studies are based on the analysis of literary sources. Mantecón Movellán and Mott’s essays, on the other hand, start from both civil and ecclesiastical judicial sources from the Iberian Peninsula. The analysis of these documents presents numerous methodological difficulties, photographing the unbalanced power relations between judges and defendants. However, reading them against the grain allows us to extract a large amount of useful information for the reconstruction of proscribed sexual practices and relations between Muslims and Christians. The authors have paid particular attention to shared social spaces and the construction of networks in which the lives of individuals intertwined. The majority of the cases analysed concern Muslim slaves in the Catholic world or, conversely, Christian slaves in Muslim regions.

In this type of source, the intimate experiences of the suspects remain largely inaccessible to historical investigation. However, it has proven fruitful to pay

47. *Ibid.*, p. 65. For the current review, up to note 51, I rely upon a previous article: Umberto Grassi, “Omosessualità islamiche e relazioni tra cristiani e musulmani: nuove prospettive di ricerca”, *Storica*, 60 (2014), pp. 51-89.

48. Guardi, Vanzan, *Che genere di Islam*, p. 122. On the etymology of *tarsā baĉeh* and on the motif of love for Christians, the authors refer to: Franklin D. Lewis, “Sexual Occidentation: The Politics of Conversion, Christian-Love and Boy-Love in ‘Aṭṭār”, *Iranian Studies*, 42 (2009), pp. 693-723.

49. Franz Rosenthal, “Male and Female: Described and Compared”, in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, pp. 24-54: 35-36.

50. Paul Sprachman, “‘Le beau garçon sans merci’: The Homoerotic Tale in Arabic and Persian”, in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, pp. 192-209.

51. Norman Roth, “‘Deal Gently with the Young Man’: Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain”, *Speculum*, 57 (1982), pp. 20-51.

attention to the size of semi-clandestine networks. From this perspective, it is clear that homosexual practices played a role in cementing social ties, helping to promote forms of contact not only between religious minorities and majorities, but also between individuals from different social classes. In the Spanish cases analysed by Mantecón Movellán, it is apparent that prostitution allowed Muslims and black slaves to obtain economic advantages, exploiting the exotic charm that made them objects of particular attraction in the eyes of some members of the Spanish noble class who were willing to pay for their favours.<sup>52</sup> Mott's cases instead show that, in the North African context, in addition to the violence suffered at the hands of their masters, homosexual relations sometimes played an important role in the social promotion of Portuguese slaves within the new economic contexts in which they were forced to enter.

On the other hand, two cases in which individuals crossed gender and religious boundaries repeatedly, explored across two of the essays in the final part of the volume, shed light on biographical elements. That of Eleno/a de Céspedes, a well-known case, is reintroduced in the conclusion to Mantecón Movellán's article. Elena/o was born as a woman in Spain and was a moorish slave and a convert who was freed and who, during their life, embraced a male identity, accompanied by a mysterious change of sex. Their social rise, obtained first through their service as a soldier and then through their commitment to the medical art, only ended when Elena/o tried to obtain the authorisation to marry a woman, and thus ended up in the hands of inquisitorial justice.<sup>53</sup> In the final article, I then bring to light the story of Susanna Daza, a "Christian *de mora*" in Sicily who was accused of denying the Catholic faith after she first embraced Islam and then Judaism, following her romantic relationships with a Muslim and a Jew.

The study of religious conversions has been fundamental to research on the fluidity of boundaries between the three main monotheistic faiths in the Mediterranean region.<sup>54</sup> In cases of enslavement in a foreign land, conversion could be purely opportunistic, inspired by the desire for redemption or social rise within the new community, or it could be dictated by a sincere "conversion of the

52. Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

53. On Elena/o, see the bibliography cited in Mantecón Movellán's chapter.

54. Bartolomé Bennassar, Lucile Bennassar, *Les Chrétiens d'Allah XI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Perrin, 1991; Lucia Rostagno, *Mi faccio turco. Esperienze ed immagini dell'islam nell'Italia moderna*, Naples, Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, 1983; Lucetta Scaraffia, *Rinnegati. Per una storia dell'identità occidentale*, Rome and Bari, Laterza, 1993; *Conversion: Old World and New*, ed. by Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, Rochester and New York, University of Rochester Press, 2003; *Conversions islamiques. Identités religieuses en Islam méditerranéen*, ed. by Mercedes García-Arenal, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001; Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversion to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011; *Diaspora Morisca*, ed. by Giovanna Fiume and Stefania Pastore, special issue of *Quaderni Storici*, 144 (2013); *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning*, ed. by Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014; *Conversion and Islam in the Early Modern Mediterranean: The Lure of the Other*, ed. by Claire Norton, New York and London, Routledge, 2017.

heart”); often, however, it was located in an intermediate sphere between these two extremes.<sup>55</sup> The documentation makes it difficult to understand where along this spectrum the subjects involved were located. The inquisitorial documents (the main source, at least on the Catholic front, for reconstructing the history of conversions) were mostly composed following rhetorical and formular schemes. These serial repetitions result from the use of “expedite justice”, which aimed to find a solution through lean and flexible procedures and to resolve a problem that, due to its pervasiveness, was difficult to manage without some accommodation. Furthermore, the political implications were manifold and the presence of slaves, both converts and non, on both Muslim and Christian soil, was often managed by taking into account the consequences that overly restrictive policies would have had on the enslaved communities held by the rival powers.<sup>56</sup>

Recent research has brought attention to the relationship between gender and conversions. Whether an individual was a man or woman influenced their transition between one religion and another and, conversely, these transits affected their gendered performances.<sup>57</sup> The repressive reaction was not only triggered because religious boundaries were violated, but also, and especially in the case of women, when the conditions of patriarchal domination were violated through religious choice. Susanna’s case clearly falls into this second category. However, it also allows us to reflect upon the phenomenon of multiple conversions, which was not uncommon in the early modern Mediterranean, and on its relationship with the phenomena of cultural hybridisation, indifferentism and religious skepticism.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Exploring the history of sexual transgressions and non-aligned gender performances allows us to shed light on a largely unexplored dimension of Mediterranean history and Muslim-Christian relations. From the perspective

55. See among others: *Le commerce des captifs: Les intermédiaires dans l'échange et le rachat des prisonniers en Méditerranée, XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. by Wolfgang Kaiser, Rome, École Française de Rome, 2008; *La schiavitù nel Mediterraneo*, ed. by Giovanna Fiume, special issue of *Quaderni Storici*, 107 (2001); Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Salvatore Bono, *Schiavi musulmani nell'Italia moderna: Galeotti, vu' cumpra', domestici*, Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1999.

56. Stefano Villani, “Dalla Gran Bretagna all'Italia: narrazioni di conversione nel Sant'Uffizio di Pisa e Livorno”, in *La città delle nazioni. Livorno e i limiti del cosmopolitismo (1586-1834)*, ed. by Andrea Addobbati and Marcella Aglietti, Pisa, Pisa University Press, 2016, pp. 109-126; Giovanna Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranee. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2009, p. xv; Maria Sofia Messina, “La ‘resistenza’ musulmana e i ‘martiri’ dell’Islam: moriscos, schiavi e cristiani rinnegati di fronte all’inquisizione spagnola di Sicilia”, *Quaderni Storici*, 42/126/3 (2007), pp. 743-772: 746.

57. See *Conversions: Gender and Religious Change in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Simon Ditchfield and Helen Smith, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017.

58. For further readings, see the footnotes of my chapter in the present volume.

of “high” culture and regulatory strategies, numerous parallels emerge that are evident above all in the transversal circulation of themes and texts. However, there is also a substantial difference in the degree of freedom with which love and homosexual attraction could be represented in literary and artistic spheres without incurring moral or judicial sanctions.

From the point of view of social practices, focusing attention on proscribed sexuality allows us to understand the importance of clandestine activity and illegality in allowing for interaction between individuals of different faiths, particularly considering the complex dynamics that governed relations between religious minorities and majorities. Sexual transgressions, due to their proscribed nature, favoured the establishment of clandestine networks. These could, in turn, open communication channels between groups that rarely made official contact otherwise, providing benefits that ranged from the most immediate enrichment opportunities to much more complex processes of social promotion and integration.

At the same time, especially in border areas such as Spain, Sicily or Balkan Europe, the boundaries between faiths were frequently crossed, in a range of configurations that stretched from contaminations and syncretisms to radical religious conversion. If these shifts were sometimes forced, as in the case of mass conversions, or driven by opportunism, at other times they embodied a deep dissatisfaction with the religion and the cultural and social background to which the subjects belonged. In any case, they ended up affecting shared views of religion, favouring hybridisation processes that could lead to skeptical attitudes or open disbelief. In these contexts, unaligned sexuality and gender transgressions sometimes manifested in radically subversive attitudes towards institutionalised religions, the established order, gender roles and patriarchal domination.<sup>59</sup> Despite the poverty of information on the protagonists’ intimate beliefs in the sources analysed across these essays, we can reasonably assume that in these latter cases we move beyond mere opportunistic decisions to touch upon that dark and inaccessible sphere in which social practices intertwined with the more intimate dimension of religious beliefs and cultural convictions. To what extent sexuality and “deviant” behaviours were the cause or consequence of unorthodox approaches to religion in a cross-cultural context remains an open question, and one upon which, we hope, new studies will continue to focus and reflect.

(Translated by Kalina Yamboliev)

59. See: Rostagno, *Mi faccio turco*; Giovanni Romeo, *Amori proibiti. I concubini tra Chiesa e Inquisizione*, Rome and Bari, Laterza, 2008, pp. 63-111; Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 31-33.