

CHAPTER ONE

Looking East before 1453: The Saracen in the Medieval European Imagination

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“To fight against the Turk is the same as resisting God, who visits our sins upon us with this rod.”¹ So declared Martin Luther in 1518, in defence of his 95 theses. Like countless Christian authors before him, from seventh-century Syria or eighth-century Spain or Italy to fifteenth-century Constantinople, Luther cast Muslim conquerors in the traditional role of “God’s rod”, the unwitting instruments of His justice and wrath. This is of course a standard way for Christians, Jews or Muslims to interpret adversities. From the time of the Hebrew prophets, calamities such as plague, famine or invasion are seen as manifestations of divine punishment, for which the appropriate responses are repentance and spiritual purification.

Luther develops this theme in greater detail in 1529, when, in the aftermath of Suleyman the Magnificent’s annexation of much of Hungary, the risk of large swathes of the German lands falling under Ottoman dominion was a real and present danger. While Luther acknowledges that the emperor has the right and duty to defend his empire against the Turk, the most effective means of protection remain repentance and prayer, in order to “take the rod out of God’s hand.”² Luther’s message is the same in his *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turk* of 1541: “The Turk, you see, is our ‘schoolmaster.’ He has to discipline and teach us to fear God and to pray. Otherwise we will do what we have been doing—rot in sin and complacency.”³ Just as the Israelites refused to listen to their prophets and needed to be whipped by the king of Babylon, so do the Germans need the chastisement of the Turk.

It is not necessary, of course, to know anything about Islam in order to cast the Turk in this role of divine scourge. When, in the late 1520s, Luther begins to show interest in learning about the Turks’ beliefs and religious practices, it is for two principal reasons: first, as a foil for his critiques of the Catholic Church, in order to show that “the Pope’s devil . . . is bigger than the Turk’s devil” [*Appeal for Prayer against the Turks*, 227] He writes in 1530:

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The religion of the Turks or Muhammad is far more splendid in ceremonies . . . than ours, even including that of the religious or all the clerics. The modesty and simplicity of their food, clothing, dwellings, and everything else, as well as the fasts, prayers, and common gatherings of the people . . . are nowhere seen among us—or rather it is impossible for our people to be persuaded to them. Furthermore, which of our monks, be it a Carthusian . . . or a Benedictine, is not put to shame by the miraculous and wondrous abstinence and discipline among their religious? Our religious are mere shadows when compared to them, and our people clearly profane when compared to theirs. Not even true Christians, not Christ himself, not the apostles or prophets ever exhibited so great a display. This is the reason why many persons so easily depart from faith in Christ for Muhammadanism and adhere to it so tenaciously. I sincerely believe that no papist, monk, cleric, or their equal in faith would be able to remain in their faith if they should spend three days among the Turks.⁴

In other words, the Turks are better Catholics than the papists themselves: convinced that their merit is reflected in their works, they excel in charity, fasting, devotion and prayer. If one is measured by works, the Turks outshine the papists. Proof, for Luther, that Catholics are doomed, more even than the Turks, for placing their hope in ceremonies, indulgences, fasting and the like, rather than in faith. Qualified praise of Muslim piety, sometimes misread by modern scholars as “relative tolerance”, is in fact a common *topos*: eighth century Syrian monophysites presented the Muslims as better masters and more pious than the Byzantine duophysite “heretics”, while Latin writers in the Crusader states used praise of Muslim piety to lambast the dissolute mores of Latin Christians. For Luther, the pious Turk can be used to bash (literally and figuratively) the dissolute papist.

Luther’s second reason for learning more about Islam is to counter those Germans who admire Muslims for their piety and justice and who would prefer the Sultan’s dominion to the oppression at the hands of their compatriots. “Some praise the Turk’s government because he allows everyone to believe what he will so long as *he* [the Sultan] remains the temporal lord” [*On War against the Turk*, 175]. “Since now,” he writes in 1530, “we have the Turk and his religion at our very doorstep, our people must be warned lest, either moved by the splendour of the Turkish religion and the external appearance of their customs, or offended by the meagre display of our own faith or the deformity of our customs, they deny their Christ and follow Muhammad.” [*Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*] This fear pervades Luther’s writings on Islam: fear not merely of conquest of the German lands by the Ottoman armies, but—what was of course much worse for Luther—of the attraction that Turkish culture and Muslim religion would exercise on the Sultan’s German subjects, leading them to convert to Islam, or rather, as Luther puts it, to apostatize, to “become Turks”. In order to prevent such apostasy, Luther needs to study Islam, its practices and

doctrines, in order to refute it. The hostile, polemical view of Muhammad, the Koran, and Islam that Luther offers his readers is meant to cultivate in them a sufficient disdain for Islam to inoculate them against apostasy, even if they should find themselves under the Sultan’s rule, tempted both by the material advantages of conversion and by Muslim doctrine and practice.

In this, too, Luther is in the same situation as countless Christian writers before him, who, either as *dhimmis* in the heart of the *Dar al-Islam* or *harbis* near its borders like Luther, contemplate with alarm the conversion of Christians to Islam.⁵ From the seventh century to Luther’s day, from Iraq to the Iberian peninsula, Christian authors wrote apologetic and polemical tracts designed to discourage apostasy, portraying Muhammad as a false prophet and a heresiarch, lambasting the Koran, mocking Muslim ritual. To the legal discrimination and condescension that they received from their Muslim overlords, these Christian authors responded with equal and opposing scorn. It is important to bear in mind these origins of Christian polemical views of Islam. In the light of the current vogue for “post-colonial studies”, inspired in part by Edward Said’s work on the links between Orientalism and colonial ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and France, students of Medieval and early modern Christian polemics against Islam tend to look for a pre-imperial Orientalism, for discourses that justify Christian or Western hegemony over Muslim subjects.⁶ Such discourse indeed exists, notably in the context of Crusade to the Levant and *Reconquista* in the Iberian Peninsula: the religious inferiority of the Muslim legitimates his subjection to the Christian prince and his inferiority to the Christian subjects. Yet most of those Christian writers of the Middle Ages who write anti-Muslim polemics do so from the position of *dhimmis*, subjected minorities desperately (and to a large degree unsuccessfully) seeking to instill disdain for Islam in their flock to stem the tide of apostasy. These writers are not perpetrators of colonial discourse, but if anything represent what Edward Said has called “resistance culture”: they demonize the ideology of the dominant power and offer an alternative, subversive narrative of its history.⁷

For these two reasons, then—as a stick to bash papists and as a means to discourage apostasy—Luther sought, starting in the 1520s, to learn more about Islam. He turned, quite naturally, to the works of medieval scholars and polemicists who had confronted Islam from the twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries. In the 1520s, he came across a Latin manuscript of the *Libellus contra legem Saracenorum* an early fourteenth-century tract by Dominican missionary Riccoldo da Montecroce. In 1542, the Basel city council jailed two publishers who wanted to print, in Latin, a collection of texts about Islam including Robert of Ketton’s twelfth-century Latin translation of the Koran and Riccoldo da Montecroce’s *Contra legem Saracenorum*. The city fathers proclaimed that it was dangerous to publish the “fables and heresies” of the Koran. Luther intervened to convince the council that the Koran should be printed since there

was no better way to combat the Turks than to permit everyone to see for themselves Muhammad's "lies and fables". The Koran was published the following year, with a preface by Luther.⁸ 1542 was also the year in which Luther published his own German translation of Riccoldo's *Contra legem Saracenorum*.⁹ It is striking that when it comes to understanding the role of Islam in history, Luther and his contemporaries can do no better than to study, publish, and translate the work of Catholic medieval authors who confronted the same problems before them.

To understand how Luther and his contemporaries viewed the "Turk" it is hence essential to bear in mind how the medieval authors they depended upon portrayed the "Saracen". For this, there is no better place to start than to look at the career of Riccoldo da Montecroce, whose *Contra legem Saracenorum* was widely read in the sixteenth century, in Latin and in Luther's German translation.¹⁰

Riccoldo entered the Dominican order in 1267, after having received an education in letters. In 1288, after 21 years in the order, he obtained permission from Muño de Zamora, Master General of the Order, to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to preach as a missionary to Mongols and Muslims. He recounts his voyage in his *Liber Peregrinationis* (c. 1300), in which he combines a narration of his pilgrimage to the holy sites with an ethnographical sketch of the different peoples he encountered on his travels, paying particular attention to their religious beliefs and practices. He sailed to Acre in 1288 and travelled inland to visit the holy sites of Galilee, Jerusalem, the Jordan River. He describes how at each of the holy places he and his companions performed mass, reading (or singing) the relevant gospel passages. But Riccoldo was not simply on a pilgrimage: he continued East, eventually reaching Tabriz, capital of the Mongol Ilkhân Khanate, where he preached through an interpreter. He eventually made his way to Baghdad, where he studied Arabic and read the Koran.

In describing his travels in his *Liber peregrinationis*, Riccoldo is clearly surprised, not to say baffled, by the diversity of religious groups he encounters, and is at times unsure as to which groups of Christians he is to consider orthodox, which heretic. He places his description of the Saracens after his arrival in Baghdad:

This city, Baghdad, is the centre and capital of the Saracens, both in terms of their education and religion and in terms of their political power. . . . There the Saracens have their greatest universities [*maxima studia*] and their great teachers. There are many Saracen clerics [*religiosi*] there. Their different sects convene there. There one finds the great monasteries of the Saracens, called *mujarrad*, which means contemplatives. When I wanted to eliminate the perfidy of Muhammad, seeking to assault them in their capital and in the place of their university, I needed to converse with them at times; they received me as if I were an angel of God—in their schools,

classrooms, monasteries, churches or synagogues, and in their homes. And I paid close attention to their law and their works; I was astounded at how, in such a perfidious law, one could find works of such great perfection.¹¹

This passage conveys Riccoldo's ambivalence, his blend of admiration and contempt for the Muslims of Baghdad. He is indeed awed by what he sees in Baghdad, by the elaborate organization of Islamic learning and charity and by the zeal and piety of the Muslims. He describes in detail Baghdad's madrasas, which he compares favourably to European monasteries as centres for asceticism, contemplation, and study. These Saracens study assiduously, show the utmost respect in their mosques (they enter barefoot; they pray and study quietly). He praises their scrupulous respect for the rituals of ablution and prayer; he lauds their generous alms-giving, their profound respect for God's name. He affirms that he was received with such warmth and hospitality that he might have been at home amongst his own Dominican friars; his Muslim hosts always greeted him by praising Christ's name. Moreover, he affirms, brotherly love reigns amongst the Saracens; they rarely fight amongst themselves, but valiantly unite against those whom they consider the enemies of their faith. This praise may reflect Riccoldo's own experience in Baghdad, but the point, as Riccoldo makes clear, is to shame his Christian reader into better moral conduct:

We have not told these things so much in order to praise the Saracens, but rather to lambast certain Christians who are unwilling to do for the law of life what the damned do for the law of death. [Riccoldo, *Liber peregrinationis*, 172]

He spent "many years" in the East, as he himself says; it was in Baghdad that he received the news of the fall of Acre to the Mamluks in 1291; he was still there, apparently, in 1295, when the Ilkhan Ghazan converted from Buddhism to Islam, sparking destructions of churches, synagogues and Buddhist temples. It may be at this time of persecution that Riccoldo fled Baghdad only to be accosted by two Muslim Mongols who beat him, tried to make him convert to Islam, "to preach Muhammad and his perfidious law", stripped him of his Dominican habit and obliged him to make a living as a camel-driver.

But it was the news of the fall of Acre to al-Ashraf Khalîl, Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, on May 18, 1291, that particularly filled the Dominican missionary with despair. Riccoldo contemplates in distress as booty from Acre fills the markets of Baghdad: sacred objects, liturgical books, slaves. How could God allow this to happen? In consternation, the friar composes *Five Letters on the Fall of Acre*, which he opens with the following explanation:

And so it came to pass that I was in Baghdad, 'among the captives by the river of Chebar' [Ezekiel 1:1], the Tigris. This garden of delights in which I found myself enthralled me, for it was like a paradise in its abundance of trees, its fertility, its

Those Christians who rejected conversion, who chose to remain Christian, needed to come up with another exegesis of these events. This was sought, naturally, in authoritative books: the Bible and the writings of Church fathers. These were indeed a rich source of explanation: the Hebrew Prophets, the Gospels and the book of Revelations, spoke of the tribulations that God's people were to suffer at the hands of infidel oppressors. These passages were redeployed and reinterpreted to make sense of the Muslim victories, just as Luther would do to explain the conquests of the "Turk".

Yet Riccoldo, in this letter, is not content to piously reiterate the textbook hermeneutics of Christian defeat; his anger and his despair at God's harsh judgment will not allow him to do so. Here, even more than elsewhere in Riccoldo's works, one senses the disillusionment of the missionary as he comes to realize that his grand project is doomed to failure. Riccoldo addresses this first of his *Five Letters on the Fall of Acre* to God, expressing his astonishment that He should allow such misfortune to befall Christendom, that He should give such power and glory to the Saracens. The Saracens, Jews and Tartars mock us, he says, asking, "Where is the God of Christians?" taunting Christians who thought that Jesus son of Mary was God, and that he would help them. Riccoldo himself saw in Baghdad the sad procession of Christian prisoners bound for the slave markets, including nuns, sanctified virgins, now bound for infidels' beds. He saw liturgical items and Latin books sold in the markets (where he bought a manuscript of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*). He also found, to his horror, a Dominican habit, torn and bloody where the sword had killed his fellow friar; is it just for the holy Dominican and Franciscan friars to perish so? How, Riccoldo asks God, can You allow this "cruel beast" to dishonour Your name, deflower Your sanctified virgins, violate Your churches? Riccoldo chides himself for having been so presumptuous as to think he could "defeat [Muhammad] through Your force and destroy his perfidious law"; had not far better men attempted to slay this "beast" and failed, notably Francis and Dominic? Had not great Kings and barons, including "Louis, Saint, King of France", attempted to destroy it by force, only to suffer humiliating defeats that discouraged other Christians? Riccoldo had come as a Dominican missionary to bring Mongols and Muslims into the Christian fold: now Acre had fallen, its inhabitants sold into slavery or massacred; Mongols were converting to Islam; and Christians in Baghdad faced threats and violence.

What troubled Riccoldo most is that God should permit (even seem to condone) the "blasphemies" of the Koran: that Jesus is man, not God; that he was in fact a Muslim who never claimed to be God; that the Apostles, Abraham and other biblical figures were Muslims. These of course are the same things that will shock countless other Christian readers of the Koran, from the anonymous Christian Arab who wrote the *Risalat al-Kindi* in the ninth century to Luther in the sixteenth and beyond.

many fruits. This garden was watered by the rivers of Paradise, and the inhabitants built gilt houses all around it. Yet I was saddened by the massacre and capture of the Christian people. I wept over the loss of Acre, seeing the Saracens joyous and prospering, the Christians squalid and consternated: little children, young girls, old people, whimpering, threatened to be led as captives and slaves into the remotest countries of the East, among barbarous nations.

Suddenly, in this sadness, swept up into an unaccustomed astonishment, I began, stupefied, to ponder God's judgment concerning the government of the world, especially concerning the Saracens and the Christians. What could be the cause of such massacre and such degradation of the Christian people? Of so much worldly prosperity for the perfidious Saracen people? Since I could not simply be amazed, nor could I find a solution to this problem, I decided to write to God and his celestial court, to express the cause of my astonishment, to open my desire through prayer, so that God might confirm me in the truth and sincerity of the Faith, that he quickly put an end to the law, or rather the perfidy, of the Saracens, and more than anything else that he liberate the Christian captives from the hands of the enemies.¹²

The Saracens seem smugly satisfied with their victory, yet another proof that God is on their side. How can a Christian explain such a setback? Can it be that God indeed prefers the religion of the victors? Riccoldo prays that God help him combat his doubt: "confirm me in the truth and sincerity of the Faith." If Riccoldo is to remain Christian, he needs to answer this perplexing question: how and why should God allow His Christians to be defeated by Muslims? Riccoldo feels the attraction of Muslim civilization—its wealth, culture, learning; indeed, this attraction makes it all the more necessary for him to affirm his Christian identity, to argue for the superiority of Christianity over the "Saracen perfidy." Christendom is in peril, and Riccoldo needs to reassure his reader (and perhaps especially himself) that God is still on the Christians' side. To do so, he has to explain Islam's role in Christian history and to define it theologically.

Countless Christians, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, found themselves in Riccoldo's predicament: confronted by an expanding, dynamic Muslim civilization, they needed to make sense of it. In the first century of Islam, most of the former Christian Roman Empire, from Syria to Spain, was brought under Muslim control in a conquest of unprecedented proportions. How was God's apparent abandonment of His Christian Empire to be explained? True, over the course of the Middle Ages Christian states conquered (or "re-conquered") many of the islands of the Mediterranean, all of the Iberian peninsula, and even, for a fleeting 88 years, Jerusalem, Holy City to three religions. Yet at the same time, Islam was expanding across Asia and Africa and (subsequently, with the rise of the Ottomans) into the heart of Europe. How were Christians to respond? The simplest and obvious choice, for many, was to accept the logic of Muslim expansion: God must indeed prefer Islam, historical destiny and social pressure offered strong arguments in favour of conversion to Islam.

As You know, frequently, as I read the Koran in Arabic, with great grief and impatience in my heart, I would place this book on Your altar, before the image of You and your holy mother and say: 'Read! Read what Muhammad says!' And it seemed to me that You did not want to read. [*Epistolae* III, 286]

Can it be true, Riccocolo asks Jesus, that you are, as the Saracens say, one of them? That would indeed explain why you favour them. He addresses the same question to the Apostles.

In the final two of the *Five Letters on the Fall of Acre*, Riccocolo comes to accept the inscrutable justice of God's ways. No longer viewing the massacre of Acre's friars as unjust, he now presents it as the glorious conferral of the crown of martyrdom. His final letter is his description of the "response" he received from God to his first four letters. He was reading Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* (the book which he had bought in a Baghdad marketplace, booty from Acre) and prayed to Gregory, asking why he received no reply to his letters and insistent prayers. He then heard a voice in his heart saying "Take it and read!"; in obedience to this voice, he opened Gregory's book and placed his finger on a random passage. Here he read that God does not directly answer the doubts and prayers of each individual, because he has answered them once and for all in Scripture. He thanks Gregory for this clear answer.

It is in his later works, the *Liber peregrinationis* and the *Libellus contra legem Saracenorum*, composed after his return to Italy in about 1300, that Riccocolo attempts to explain his failure to convert Muslims by portraying them as irrational. The initial naive optimism of the Dominican missionary as he set off to convert the Saracen infidels in 1288 gives way to astonishment and admiration of the Muslims of Baghdad to despair following the events of 1291, then finally to increasing frustration at his failure to bring the Saracens and Mongols to Christianity. This failure is due, he implies, not to his own shortcomings or those of his missionary method, much less to any lack of rationality of Christian doctrine. The culprits must be the Saracens themselves who prove by their failure to accept Christianity their own irrationality.

In the *Liber peregrinationis*, as we have seen, he describes in great detail his impressions of Baghdad, profusely praising the learning and piety of the city's Muslims. Yet he is unable to accept the idea that a philosophically-trained person could believe in what he found written in the Koran. In what seems a contradiction of his earlier praise of Muslim intellectual activity in Baghdad, Riccocolo writes:

[The Saracen] wise men began to execrate the perversity of their law. Since this law could be eliminated either through the books of the prophets, by the law of Moses, or even by the veracious books of the philosophers, therefore the Caliph of Baghdad ordered that nothing should be studied in Baghdad except the Koran. For this reason,

we find that they know very little about the truth of theology or the subtlety of philosophy. Nevertheless, their wise men put no faith in the sayings of the Koran, but deride it in secret. In public, though, they honour it, on account of their fear of others. [*Liber peregrinationis*, 186-88]

This passage has all the explicative power and sophistication of a good conspiracy theory. If these intelligent men in Baghdad seem to be pious Muslims, they are only dissimulating on account of fear. The caliph (whom Riccocolo does not name, implying that this is a generalized caliphal strategy), aware of the dangers that the study of either the Bible or philosophy poses to Muslim doctrine, bans it, allowing only the study of the Koran. These Muslim intellectuals who reject the Koran are a potential fifth column within the Muslim world that Christians can exploit to their advantage.

Yet in his *Peregrinatio*, this idea seems to contrast sharply with the glowing image of Muslim sages in Baghdad and with Riccocolo's admiration for the city's madrasas. Aware, perhaps, of the contradictions in this portrayal, Riccocolo subsequently refines it in his *Libellus contra legem Saracenorum*, which he composed within a few years after the *Peregrinatio* (and which is the text that Luther translated):

There arose against both groups [Sunnis and Shiites] certain Saracens expert in philosophy. They started to read the books of Aristotle and Plato and started to despise all the sects of the Saracens and the Koran itself. When someone warned the Caliph of Baghdad, named [name left blank in manuscript] about this, he built in Baghdad two very prestigious schools, Nizamiyya and Mustansiriyya. He reformed the study of the Koran and ordered that whoever came from the provinces to study the Koran in Baghdad, these students would have rooms and stipends for their needs. He also ordered that the Saracens and those studying the Koran should in no way study philosophy. And they do not consider those who study philosophy to be good Saracens, because they all despise the Koran.¹³

Here Riccocolo has combined (and elaborated upon) two ideas from his *Peregrinatio*, resolving the first text's apparent contradiction by bringing two elements together, making the founding of madrasas into a clever anti-intellectual ploy: the point of having government-funded educational institutes, he tries to make his reader believe, is precisely to squelch philosophical reading and speculation by assuring that only the Koran is read and taught, not any philosophical texts that will contradict it. Not that he is completely wrong: the Nizamiyya madrasa, founded by Nizam al-Mulk in 1067, indeed became a bastion for orthodoxy against philosophical speculation; its most illustrious teacher was none other than al-Ghazālī. Yet these facts are twisted to fit Riccocolo's polemical needs; it is in fact in Paris, not Baghdad, that thirteenth-century clerics forbade the study of Aristotle. Yet for Riccocolo it is

Riccoldo affirms that reason cannot be used to prove the Trinity or other Christian doctrines, but it can be used to attack Islam. Since the Koran itself testifies to the authority of the Gospel, Riccoldo continues, scripture too can be used to disprove the Koran. "One must concentrate on the refutation of such a perfidious law and show that it is not a law of God, and that the Saracens ought to accept the authority of the Gospels and the Old Testaments. We can prove this using the Koran itself, just as Goliath was killed with his own sword" [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 2, p. 68]. The strategy he is describing is essentially that of Peter of Cluny in the mid-twelfth-century: use the Koran to prove the superior authority of the Bible, then use the bible to attack Muhammad and the Koran and to prove the truth of Christianity. In the over 150 years since Peter's *Contra sectam*, despite the work of scores of Dominican missionaries, despite schooling in Arabic and in Muslim philosophy and theology, the strategy is the same, and the results will be the same: the Dominican missions to Islam are a failure.

The crux of Riccoldo's *Contra legem* is to show to potential missionaries (and through them, presumably to Muslims themselves) the *irrationality* of the Koran, of Muslim belief, of Muslim practice. While Muslims claim that the beauty of the Koran's Arabic proves its divine origins, Riccoldo affirms the contrary: the Koran is in verse, when everybody knows that God speaks to prophets clearly, *in prose* [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 4] He derides the Muslim legends of the *Mir'aj* [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 13, p. 117]. The real author of the Koran is the devil [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 14].

Riccoldo affirms that Muhammad, in the Koran, professes Christian truth without understanding it: Riccoldo produces well-worn arguments for the Trinity based on the Koran's use of plural nouns to refer to God; he also produces Koranic passages which, he claims, prove the existence of the Holy Spirit and of Christ as Word of God. He notes that the Koran praises the Torah and Gospel and asks why in that case the Muslims do not study them? The answer, he says, is that they would soon discover their error; in order to prevent this, they prohibit the study of the Bible (just as they prohibit the study of philosophy for the same reason). Indeed, he says, the Saracens have four "remedies" to prevent their error from being revealed: they kill anyone who attacks the Koran, they prohibit religious disputation, they warn not to believe what non-Saracens say, and they proclaim: "your law is for you, mine is for me" [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 15]. Yet it is amazing, says Riccoldo, that the Saracens prefer the Koran to the Gospel; the reason, once again must be their irrationality, to which there is only one remedy:

Consequently, when certain doubts arise in the Koran and certain questions which the Saracens cannot answer, they should not only be invited but be *compelled* into the Banquet of the Truth. [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 15, p. 125]

Islam that is illogical, and those who stubbornly adhere to it merely display their irrationality.¹⁴

Riccoldo's portrayal of Saracen irrationality will have a long life ahead of it; it certainly corresponds to Luther's need to denigrate the Turk. Riccoldo's *Contra legem Sarracenorum* comes at the conclusion of two centuries of Latin Christian attempts to use rational argumentation as a weapon in religious dispute. Petrus Alfonsi, an early-twelfth-century convert from Judaism, presented, in his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* of 1110, a series of philosophically- and scientifically-based arguments meant to refute the Talmud and the Koran, and to prove the irrationality of Jewish and Muslim rites. He was followed in the mid-twelfth century by Peter, abbot of Cluny, who distinguished between Jews, irrational in their refusal to accept Christ as Messiah, and Arabs, who were reputed to be learned and rational and whom he thought could be brought to Christian truth through reasoned argument.¹⁵ But it is the mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, and in particular the Dominicans, who attempted to turn this strategy into a massive missionary machine. Under the leadership of friars Ramon Penyafort and Ramon Marti, and with the support of king James I of Aragon (1213-1276), Dominican missionary friars learned Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic, studied the texts of the Talmud and Koran, composed massive manuals for missionaries based on refutation of Jewish and Muslim texts and doctrines, staged public debates with prominent Jews and Muslims, and (with the help of royal compulsion) preached to Jews and Muslims in their synagogues and mosques. Dominican Thomas Aquinas affirmed that rational argumentation could not be used to prove the truth of Christian doctrine, but could be used to prove the errors of the infidels.¹⁶

Riccoldo explains this strategy in the second chapter of his *Contra legem*, where he addresses the issue of how to argue with Saracens. They are curious and willing to discuss religion. "And since they excel in reason and have sharp intellects, they do not want to believe anything they cannot understand." [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 2, p. 68] The first thing to do in arguing with them is not to expound Christian law, for that would be casting pearls before swine, as they will only deride our doctrines.

Rather, first and principally one must insist on showing how vain their law is. For one cannot inculcate virtues before extirpating vice. And this method should be chosen since it is simpler; for it is easier to show that their faith is frivolous than to prove that our faith is true, because faith is an invisible gift from God. Whereas our faith has existence without appearance, theirs has appearance without existence. We do not have arguments [*rationes*] for proving the Trinity and the other things of our faith, for if we did faith would not be faith, and it would not be meritorious. But we have the authority of the Gospel, as even the Koran testifies, and we have miracles. [*Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ch. 2, p. 68]

Since the Saracens are unconvinced by our “rational” arguments, Riccoldo seems to be saying, they ought to be compelled to join the Church. Where dialogue fails, Riccoldo recommends force.

It would be easy, at this point, to cut to a politically correct conclusion, contrasting nasty intolerant Christian Europeans such as Riccoldo da Montecroce and Martin Luther with those friendly Muslims of Baghdad who welcome the ingrate Riccoldo with open arms, or with the Ottomans who allow Christianity to thrive under the Sultan’s rule. One could cite, *ad nauseam*, the vile things Riccoldo, Martin Luther, and other writers of their ilk say about Muhammad, false prophet and arch-heresiarch, and about the “Saracen heresy” that he founded. Yet such a simplistic contrast would cast more smoke than light on our subject.

Both Christianity and Islam are universal religions. Each provides, in the medieval and early modern periods, the key element in the ideologies of politics throughout Europe and the Near East. From the Muslim point of view, there can be no political legitimacy outside the *Dar al-Islam*; Christian and Jewish communities can be incorporated into the *Dar al-Islam* and granted religious freedoms and a good degree of judicial autonomy, but only insofar as they accept their inferior status as *dhimmi*. This legal inferiority reflects the religious inferiority of the *ahl al-kitab*, the people of the book, who indeed received divinely-inspired revelations in the Torah and Gospel, but have since corrupted them and have been surpassed by the Muslims thanks to the revelation of the Koran to Muhammad. A Muslim, in Baghdad at the turn of the fourteenth century or in Istanbul in the sixteenth, knew what to think of Christians and Christianity, knew where they stood in the social and religious hierarchies.

Christians had no such niche to assign to Islam. Jews in Christian Europe had roughly the same status as *dhimmi* in the Muslim world, a status both inferior and protected, meant to reflect their religious inferiority. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, various Latin Christian rulers, from Portugal to Sicily and Palestine, conferred more or less the same social status upon subject Muslim minorities. Yet they had no theoretical justification, in Christian terms, for doing so. On the contrary, Christian theologians classified Muslims as heretics, and heretics were to be neither tolerated nor protected, as the fate of the Cathars in thirteenth-century Languedoc made clear.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims formed their theologies—and their political ideologies—in contact and competition with each other and with the scientific and philosophical traditions of Antiquity. In all three religions, some writers warned of the dangers that the philosophical and scientific traditions posed to the revealed faith, while others employed the tools of philosophy in attempts to prove the tenets of their faith and to attack those of rival faiths. It is only in Latin Christianity that this attempt to marry revelation and rationality produced a massive missionary movement. Riccoldo, coming at the end of this movement,

confronting its abject failure to convert Jews, Muslims, and Mongols, can only conclude that the fault lies with his irrational audience.

To do otherwise would be to deny the either the rationality or the universality of Christianity. There are occasional Christian Europeans who deny Christianity’s universality. There is the well-known “parable of the three rings,” found in a thirteenth-century Italian story collection and retold by Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, in which Saladin asks a Jew which of the three monotheistic religions is the greatest. The Jew responds with a parable:

There was a father who wore a beautiful ring of gold and jewels. He had three sons, each of whom asked him for the right to have the ring when he died. The father went in secret to a master goldsmith and had him make two rings identical to his own; only the father could tell the difference between the three. Thus he gave a ring to each of his three sons, and they argued vainly about which was the real one. So it is with our three religions; we all claim to follow the true religion, but only God, our father, can truly tell which is the best.

The Sultan, impressed with the reply, lavishes gifts upon the Jew.¹⁷ The story was retold many times throughout the middle ages and beyond.¹⁸ It emboldened Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller presented in Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, to proclaim to the Inquisition that “the majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to Heretics, to Turks, and to Jews; and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner.” The Miller was subsequently burned as a heretic.¹⁹ The sentiments he expressed are echoed by a number of Christians captives in the Maghreb in the sixteenth century who converted to Islam and later, on return to Europe, reverted to Christianity. They informed the officers of the Inquisition that both Turks and Christians could be saved through their separate religious laws.²⁰ They, too, were condemned for these views. The situation was not fundamentally different in Protestant Europe: sixteenth-century Europe clung to the ideology of Christian universalism.

François de Medeiros, in his *L’Occident et l’Afrique*, affirms that European Christians of the thirteenth century abandoned the universalism of the Gospel and of early church in order to portray themselves as a new Chosen People, whom God preferred over the nations: physically, morally and intellectually superior to Africans and Asians, whom they branded as pagans, heretics and schismatics.²¹ Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the two visions—universalist and exclusivist—have coexisted in European culture throughout middle ages and beyond. Through mission and crusade, Europeans sought to bring their universal religion (and their culture, which for them was inseparable from it) to the wayward Saracens, Tartars and others. Yet the religious and social order that (for them) would invariably accompany adhesion to Christianity was a European one. The portrayal of Islam as a debauched heresy, the defensive

ideology of "colonized" *dhimmi*s, had been transformed into an aggressive ideology of cultural superiority justifying European conquest and hegemony over the benighted Other.

Perhaps indeed European denigration of the other is the back side of Christian universalism. As European Christian ideology crystallized and hardened in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was less and less room for dissent. The increasing use of reason to justify this ideology aggravated the situation: those who refused to listen to Christian reason must be irrational: the blind Jew, the stubborn heretic, the flesh-bound Saracen. Well into the thirteenth century, the Saracen indeed had a better reputation than the non-Christians closer to home. The Saracen was reputed for his learning, seen as eminently rational, he (like the Jew) became the object of philosophical polemics and impassioned preaching. When, towards the end of the thirteenth century, it became clear that the Saracen was (like the Jew) impermeable to such "rational" argument, he was relegated to the sub-rational world of carnal, semi-beastly humans. The Saracen (and more generally the non-Christian, be he Jew or Cathar or, in the centuries that followed, an African animist or an Inca priest) was different, was inferior, precisely because he refused the "universal" and "rational" message of Christianity.

It is in the eighteenth century that the universality of Christianity will be seriously challenged in Europe, by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. Then and only then can a European write a sympathetic biography of Muhammad: Henri, count of Boulainvilliers, presents Muhammad as a reformer who abolished the scandalous privileges of the Christian clergy and reinstated a pious and simple communion between God and his faithful, dispensing with needless clerical intermediaries.²² Boulainvilliers, unlike Luther, can now present Muhammad in a positive light, but he still is a stick with which to beat catholic "papists". Yet not all Enlightenment writers were so kind with Muhammad: Voltaire presents him as emblematic of religious fanaticism, the rational European's new enemy number one.²³ The same writers who decried and reject Christianity's claim to rationality and universalism provide Europe with a new universalist doctrine, also based on rationality, and among the irrational enemies often derided, we are not surprised to find the Turk. Riccolds's and Luther's Christian universalism is dead, but the irrational Saracen lives on.

Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, in *Luther's Works* (55 volumes; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1975) 31:91-92, quoted by James Boyce and Sarah Henrich, "Martin Luther Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530) and Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'ân (1543), *Word & World* 16 (1996), 250-66 (citation p. 252).
2. Martin Luther, *On War against the Turk* in *Luther's Works* 46:161-205 (quotation p. 170).
3. Martin Luther, *Appeal for Prayer against the Turks* in *Luther's Works* 43:219-41 (quotation p. 224).
4. Martin Luther, *Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), translation by Boyce and Henrich, 259.
5. See John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
6. I will not try here to catalog all the responses to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), but refer the reader to two recent reflections on this subject: Andrew Rotter, K.E. Fleming and Kathleen Biddick, 'Orientalism Twenty Years on,' *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 1204-1249; Lucy Pick et al., 'Orientalism and Medieval Studies', *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 5 (1999), 265-357.
7. For the idea of 'resistance culture' see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993). For an application of this notion to a group of *dhimmi*s in nineteenth century Spain, see Tolan, "Mahomet et l'Antéchrist dans l'Espagne du IX^{ème} siècle," in *Orient und Okzident in der Kultur des Mittelalters; Monde oriental et monde occidental dans la culture médiévale. Wodan: Greifswalder Beiträge zum Mittelalter* 68 (1997), 167-80.
8. Translation by Boyce and Henrich, 262-66.
9. Ricoldus de Monte Crucis, *Confutatio Alcorani (1300) : kommentierte lateinisch-deutsche Textausgabe = Verlegung des Alcoran (1542)* Textausg. von Johannes Ehmann. - Würzburg : Echter [u.a.], 1999. - 339 S. - (Corpus Islamo-Christianum / Series Latina) ; 6).
10. What follows is based in large part on Tolan, *Saracens*, pp. 245-54. On Riccolds, see Emilio Panella, 'Ricerche su Riccolds da Monte di Croce', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 58 (1988), pp. 5-85.
11. Riccolds, *Libet peregrinationis, in Pérègrination. en terre sainte et au Proche Orient et lettres sur la chute de Saint-Jean d'Acre*. Latin edition and French translation by René Kappler. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997. 154-56.
12. Riccolds da Montecroce, *Epistolae V de perditione Aconis 1291*. R. Röhrich, ed., in *Archives de l'Orient latin* 2 (1884), 258-96, preface, p.264, with corrections by Emilio Panella, 'Presentazione,' in *Memorie domenicane*, NS 17 (1986), xx.
13. Riccolds, *Contra legem Saracenorum*, ch. 13, p. 121. The Nizamīya madrasa was founded by the caliph Nizām al-Mulk in 1067; the Mustansirīya madrasa by the caliph al-Mustansir bi' llāh in 1233. Neither of these caliphs prohibited the study of philosophy. See Mérigoux's notes to above-cited passage.
14. See Tolan, 'Saracen Philosophers Secretly Deride Islam,' *Medieval Encounters*:

- Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 8 (2002), 185-208.
15. See Tolan, *Saracens*, chapter 6.
 16. See Tolan, *Saracens*, chapter 10.
 17. *Novellino*, Italian text edition with French translation by Gérard Genot and Paul Larivaille (Paris: 10/18, 1988), § 73. In this version, the question is a trap set by Saladin to trick the Jew into insulting Islam and giving him a pretext for taking his riches from him; Saladin is humbled by the Jew's reply and lets him go unharmed. According to Boccaccio, who retells the story in the *Decameron* (1.3) Saladin confessed his evil intentions to the Jew and then showered gifts upon him, making him a special counselor and close friend.
 18. The tale is told in the *Gesta romanorum*, in Bosone da Gubbio's *Avventuroso Cicerliano*, and in the Hebrew *Schebet Jehuda* (G. Paris, 296-8). The *Dit du Vrai Aniel* (composed between 1270 and 1285) is an allegorical poetic version of the tale it concludes that Christianity is the true religion, given miraculous powers of the Christian "ring"; see *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le Moyen Age* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), 387. In 1779, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing used the tale as the basis for his play *Nathan der Weise* (see Nathan der Weiss. *Vollständiger Dokumentation von Peter Demetz* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1966).
 19. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, John and Anne Tedeschi, trans. (London: Penguin, 1982): 50-51.
 20. Bannassar, Bartolomé and Lucille, *Les Chrétiens d'Allah: L'histoire extraordinaire des renégats, XVI^e - XVII^e siècles* (Paris: Perrin, 1989), 437-41.
 21. François de Medeiros, *L'Occident et l'Afrique (XIII^e - XV^e siècles)* (Paris: Karthala, 1985), chapter nine (esp. pp. 237-38).
 22. Boulainvilliers, Henri, comte de, *La vie de Mahomet* (Amsterdam: chez P. Humbert, 1730); English translation *The life of Mahomet* (London, W. Hinchliffe, 1731; reprint Piscataway : Gorgias Press, 2002).
 23. Voltaire, *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète. : tragédie*. Amsterdam: Jacques Desbordes., 1743. English translations: *Mahomet the impostor. A tragedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, by His Majesty's servants* (London: J. Watts, 1744); *Mahomet the prophet, or, Fanaticism: a tragedy in five acts. Translated, with an introd., by Robert L. Myers* (New York: Ungar, 1964).