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Nicholas of Cusa's *Cribratio Alkorani* (1461): Sources, Scholars, and Narrative Maintenance

Cribratio Alkorani Mikołaja z Kuzy (1461).
Źródła, uczeni i podtrzymywanie dominującej narracji

ABSTRACT: The article points out that Cusanus scholars tend to celebrate their subject as a proponent of 'interreligious dialogue.' Preoccupied with Cusanus' irenic and much-praised dialogue *On the Peace of the Faith* (*De Pace Fidei*, 1453), they either ignore or belittle significant issues, such as Cusanus' active engagement in preparations for a crusade, the harsh polemical *Scrutiny of the Qur'an* (*Cribratio Alkorani*, 1461), which rejects the prophethood of Mohammad, and the harsh expressions against Mohammad in Cusanus' sermons. The author's thesis is that scholars employ filters that establish their agenda by devaluing or wiping away entirely anything not in line with *On the Peace of the Faith*; they defend and cultivate the prevalent narrative and their hero's received image. In this paper, Nathan Ron exposes this unacceptable phenomenon and condemns it.

KEY WORDS: Kuzańczyk, *Cribratio Alkorani*, *De Pace Fidei*, interreligious dialogue, Qur'an, Mohammad, Jews, crusade

ABSTRAKT: W artykule zwrócono uwagę, że badacze Mikołaja z Kuzy mają tendencję do uznawania go za zwolennika „dialogu międzyreligijnego”. Zajmując się analizą irenicznego wysoce poważanego dialogu Kuzańczyka *O pokoju wiary* (*De Pace Fidei*, 1453), ignorują albo bagatelizują istotne kwestie, takie jak aktywne zaangażowanie myśliciela w przygotowania do krucjaty czy ostra polemika w dziele *Przesiewanie Koranu* (*Cribratio Alkorani*, 1461), w którym Mikołaj z Kuzy odrzuca prorocтва Mahometa i wypowiada się o nim w ostrym tonie. Autor artykułu postawił tezę, że uczeni ustawiają filtry, za pomocą których dewalują lub całkowite wymazują wszystko, co nie jest zgodne z *O pokoju wiary*; w ten sposób bronią i podtrzymują dominującą narrację i otrzymany wizerunek swojego bohatera. W niniejszym artykule Nathan Ron ujawnia i potępia to niedopuszczalne zjawisko.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Mikołaj z Kuzy, Kuzańczyk, *Cribratio Alkorani*, *De Pace Fidei*, dialog międzyreligijny, Koran, Mahomet, Żydzi, krucjata

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is a relatively recent phenomenon. It commenced in the late nineteenth century when the World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in September 1893. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were recognized as the ten great religions of the world, and 400 representatives of these religions participated in the event alongside thousands of other attendees. As the organizers put it, the gathering was about cooperation between the different religious communities and an amiable encounter between people with strong convictions in the hope that they would come closer to the one truth. The Vatican, at that point, thwarted Catholic participation and denounced such conventions.¹

In 1964, in the context of enacting the famous *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Paul VI instituted a department of the Roman Curia in charge of relations with other religions. This department later became to be known the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). Its responsibilities were “to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of other religious traditions; to encourage the study of religions; to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.” Most significantly, the council stipulated that dialogue is two-way communication that “implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment.”² The general positive tendency of the Church toward interreligious dialogue has not changed since then. On the contrary, the Vatican, which had grave objections in 1893, and in 1991 emphasized the evangelical mission of interreligious dialogue, is today one of the great proponents of a dialogue between religions

¹ Cf. M. Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue*, [in:] *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, eds. D. Cheetham, D. Pratt, D. Thomas, Oxford 2013, pp. 193–194. See also: P. Weller, *How Participation Changes Things: Inter-Faith, Multi-Faith, and a New Public Imaginary*, [in:] *Faith in the Public Realm: Controversies, Policies and Practices*, eds. A. Dinham, R. Furbey, V. Lowndes, Bristol 2009, p. 66.

² The citations are taken from the official Vatican website: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html [access: 15.06.2023] (under the subtitle *Nature and Goals of PCID*). Note that it is not the PCID but another pontifical body that deals with Christian-Jewish relations.

which is disassociated from proselytising.³ Pope Francis's tenure of office has been marked by increased emphasis placed on interreligious dialogue.⁴ The definitions of interreligious dialogue found across the literature agree that it means "to listen, to hear the words of the other. Here dialogue points in a direction very different from that of the dominant approach to interreligious relations in the past, which was the will to have the other hear oneself."⁵ To put it otherwise, people engaging in interreligious dialogue want to show that intolerance, conflict, or violence should not have the last word. Notedly,

interreligious dialogue concerns all the positive and constructive interactions between adherents of different religions, who want to encounter one another in a peaceful manner; who want to exchange ideas with one another, and who want to learn from one another's faith.⁶

Accordingly, interreligious dialogue is not about convincing people to convert from their religion and embrace another, nor is it a polemical attempt to prove the superiority of one's own religious over any other religion.

The goals of interreligious dialogues may differ, "from peaceful coexistence to social change, and from mutual understanding to actual religious growth. But the common denominator in all these forms of inter-religious engagement is mutual respect and openness to the possibility of learning from the other."⁷ Attempts to make anyone abandon his religion and convert to another cannot be considered part of a dialogue; preaching to convince non-Christians to convert to Christianity – no matter how peacefully conducted – cannot be considered interreligious dialogue. Likewise, missionary activities are beyond the pale: "It is forbidden to enter dialogue with the intention or desire of converting one's

³ Cf. M. Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue*, op. cit., p. 194.

⁴ A sculpture with the title *Synagogue and Church in Our Time*, created by Joshua Kaufman in 2015, was commissioned by the Catholic Saint Joseph University in Philadelphia to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1965 *Nostra Aetate* Declaration. The sculpture, blessed by Pope Francis, depicts Synagogue and Church as study partners. An official photo of that sculpture is used for the title page of a book by F. Posset, *Respect for the Jews*, Eugene OR 2019. Significantly, the Vatican no longer maintains an office for the mission to the Jews.

⁵ P.B. King, *Interreligious Dialogue*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. C. Meister, Oxford 2011, p. 106.

⁶ M. Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue*, op. cit., p. 217.

⁷ C. Cornille, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille, Chichester 2013.

partner. People participating in dialogue don't want to be converted... dialogue is fundamentally incompatible with mission."⁸

In light of all this, I ponder this question: are scholars of Nicholas of Cusa guilty of anachronism when they ascribe a modern term and phenomenon, i.e., interreligious dialogue, to a man of the fifteenth century? The answer obviously lies in the deeds and writings of Cusanus. His case requires the researcher's full scrutiny – not a selective reading – of Cusanus' writings and a close examination of his role in setting in motion a crusade against the Turks. This role may be linked to his view of Islam, and may reaffirm or negate the reality of the 'interreligious dialogue' often ascribed to him.

A Rejection of the Prophethood of Mohammad

Two of Cusanus' works are exceptional in their contents: *On the Peace of the Faith* (*De Pace Fidei* [DPF], 1453) and *A Scrutiny of the Qur'an* (*Cribratio Alkorani* [CA], 1461). Unlike his other works, these two deal with Islam. CA does so much more extensively. DPF is a fictional dialogue, irenic in contents and spirit, while the CA is a harsh polemical analysis and is considered anti-Islamic by at least two experts in the field.⁹

For the preparation of his CA, Cusanus used Riccoldo of Montecroce's polemical *Against the Saracen law* (*Contra Legem Saracenorum*, c. 1300) and a few other works.¹⁰ Riccoldo's work was perhaps the most widely read treatise against Islam in the later Middle Ages.¹¹ In addition to this well-known and accessible

⁸ P.B. King, *Interreligious Dialogue*, op. cit., p. 106.

⁹ Cf. T.E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*, Philadelphia 2009, p. 111; J. Monfasani, *Cusanus, the Greeks, and Islam*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*, serie: *Studies in the History of Christian Traditions* 188, eds. T.M. Izbicki, J. Aleksander, D. Duclow, Leiden 2019, pp. 96, 104–105, who views CA as a serious refutation of the Qur'an. This was also Theodor Bibliander's view, whose 1543 anti-Islamic anthology, attached to the first Latin printed edition of the Qur'an, included *inter alia* Cusanus' work. See: T.E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an...*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa's *De Pace Fidei* (hereafter: DPF) and *Cribratio Alkorani* (hereafter: CA), [in:] *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, transl. J. Hopkins, 2 Vols., Minneapolis MI 2001 (hereafter: Hopkins), p. 966.

¹¹ Cf. T.E. Burman, *How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an*, "Dante Studies" 125 (2007), p. 95. See also: R. George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo Da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam*, Turnhout 2013, pp. 41–42; R. George-Tvrtković, *Deficient Sacraments or Unifying Rites? Alan of Lille, Nicholas of Cusa, and Riccoldo da Montecroce on Muslim and Jewish Praxis*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and*

material, Cusanus also addressed Dionysius the Carthusian (Denis van Rijke, c. 1402–1471) and asked him to compose a book, not for any dialogic purpose, but “to write *against* the Koran.”¹² As a result, Dionysius’ anti-Muhammed book, *Contra Perfidiam Mahumeti*, became one of Cusanus’ sources. Cusanus did indeed use it – a copy is found in the *Codex Cusanus*.¹³ Significantly, Dionysius’ book is not mentioned by Cusanus in the context of preparing DPF, but only concerning the CA.

Another source that Cusanus mentions is *A tract against the principal mistakes of treacherous Muhammad* (*Tractatus contra principales errores perfidi Machometi*, 1459) by Juan de Torquemada, “...who with cogent reasons refutes the heresies and the errors of Muhammad.”¹⁴ Harshly denigrating Muhammad, Torquemada’s work provided a thoroughly negative observation of Islam.

Notwithstanding the complex and complicated methodology of CA, and despite the disagreements among researchers on its nature, particularly on the linkage, if any, to DPF, there can be no doubt about a number of essential elements of CA, which reflect Cusanus’ polemical approach.¹⁵ Muhammad

Dialogue in the Late Middle Age, serie: *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions* 183, eds. I.C. Levy, R. George-Tvrtković, D. Duclow, Leiden 2014, pp. 113–118.

¹² CA, prologus, 6. 1–2: “Demum concitavi fratrem Dionysium Carthusiensem, ut scriberet *contra Alkoranum*” (the emphasis is mine). It was commissioned by Cusanus during his papal legation through Germany in 1451–1452. See: D.A. Mougel, *Denys le Chartreux, 1402-1471. Sa vie, son rôle, une nouvelle édition de ses ouvrages*, Montreuil-sur-Mer 1896, pp. 56–62; C. Ocker, *Contempt for Friars and Jews in Late Medieval Germany*, [in:] *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. P.J. McMichael, P.E. Myers, Leiden 2004, pp. 132–133.

¹³ Cf. *Codex Cusanus* 107, fol. 1r-193v, [in:] Hopkins, p. 966, n. 8.

¹⁴ Hopkins, p. 966; T.M. Izbicki, *Juan De Torquemada, Nicholas of Cusa and Pius II on the Islamic Promise of Paradise*, “*Revista Espanola de Filosofia Medieval*” 26/1 (2019), pp. 97–111.

¹⁵ On the CA, see the special issue of “*Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval*” 26/1 (2019), titled *Responding to the Qur’an: Cusanus, his Contemporaries and Successors*. See also: *Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World*, serie: *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 190, eds. S.J.G. Burton, J. Hollmann, E.M. Parker, Leiden 2019; *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition...*, op. cit.; *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic...*, op. cit.; M. Watanabe, *Cusanus, Islam, and Religious Tolerance*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic...*, op. cit., pp. 7–19; S.F. Aikin, J. Aleksander, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De pace fidei and the meta-exclusivism of religious pluralism*, “*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*” 74 (2013), pp. 219–235; E. Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*, transl. D. Crouner, G. Christianson, Washington DC 2010; T.M. Izbicki, *The Possibility of Dialogue with Islam*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa: In search of God and wisdom: Essays in honor of Morimichi Watanabe by the American Cusanus Society*, eds. G. Christianson, T. M. Izbicki, New York–Leiden 1991, pp. 175–183; J.E. Biechler, *A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God...*, op. cit., pp. 185–202; J. Hopkins, *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa*, Minneapolis 1994; J.E. Biechler, H.L. Bond,

is denigrated and discredited throughout CA. CA's negative attitude toward Islam is already visible in its opening lines (the prologue of book I), where Cusanus tells us of the Qur'an: "I inquired whether any of the Greeks had written against these foolish errors."¹⁶ Cusanus explains his peculiar purpose in writing CA: "...that the Muhammadan sect (which has arisen from this [heresy]) is in error and is to be repudiated, you may readily have at hand certain basic points needful to know."¹⁷ This arsenal was to assist the Pope, primarily in composing his famous letter, never sent, to the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed II, in an attempt to convert him to Christianity.¹⁸ Admittedly, a repudiation of "the Muhammadan sect which has arisen from heresy" to make a new convert to Christianity does not sound like the music of interreligious dialogue. The tone and the contents are non-dialogical but, rather, explicitly polemical. However, the researcher who feels a duty, and has thus an agenda, to portray a dialogical and tolerant Cusanus leaps over this annoying hurdle by ignoring it. Problem solved.¹⁹

Here is another example. Cusanus explains the essence of his scrutiny of the Qur'an: "I applied my mind to disclosing, even from the Koran, that the Gospel is true."²⁰ Cusanus strives to confirm Gospel truths through a critical reading of the Qur'an. Clearly, it is the truth of the Gospels that Cusanus took upon himself to prove. Does this sound like interreligious dialogue, or tolerance? Not at all. It is Cusanus' way of proving Christianity's superiority over Islam. Although it is a peculiar and sophisticated way, its final goal is essentially not

Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony: Text, Concordance and Translation of De Pace Fidei, Lewiston NY 1990.

¹⁶ Hopkins, p. 965; CA, prologus, 5. 14–15: "Quaesivi, si quis Graecorum scripsisset contra illas ineptias."

¹⁷ Hopkins, p. 965; CA, prologus, 3. 5–10: "ut [...] tu Mahumetanam sectam de illa exortam eodem spiritu, pari ingenio facundiaque aequali erroneam eliminandamque ... quaedam rudimenta scitu necessaria ad manum habebat."

¹⁸ For this letter and its interpretations, see: Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), *Epistola ad Mahomatem II (Epistle to Mohammed II)*, ed. and transl. A. Baca, New York 1990, pp. 17–18; F. Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time*, Princeton 1978, pp. 198–199; J. Hankins, *Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II*, "Dumbarton Oaks Papers" 49 (2014), pp. 129–130; N. Bisaha, *Pius II's Letter to Sultan Mehmed II: A Reexamination*, "Crusades," 1 (2002), pp. 183–200; N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 86–87, 147–152.

¹⁹ Elaborated further on under the subtitle *Ascribing Interreligious Dialogue to Cusanus*.

²⁰ Hopkins, p. 966; CA, prologus, 7: "Ego vero ingenium applicui, ut etiam ex Alkorano evangelium verum ostenderem."

different from the familiar medieval polemic, the likes of Riccoldo of Montecroce's *Against the Saracen law* or the works of other polemicists.²¹

Muhammad's (and Moses's) inferiority compared to Jesus Christ is explained in CA.

Hence, if while Moses and Muhammad were in this world, neither of them ever saw the oft-mentioned God (for no one has ever seen God), then how could they have disclosed to others the way thereto? However, suppose it were the case that they disclosed certain words that had been infused into them – [words] which symbolized, or signified, God and the way unto Him. Still, neither Moses nor Muhammad nor any other man would have been able to explain [the meanings of] these words.²²

Thus, Jesus Christ is the only one who can understand and explain the words of God and instruct us as to the right way; Muhammad and Moses are totally incapable of doing so. By his own lights, the conspicuous implication of Cusanus' argument is the absolute rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad. Unavoidably, in such terms, interreligious dialogue is impossible.

In book I of CA, Cusanus portrays Mohammad as an ignoramus who was guided by Satan ("prince of this world"), deceived and manipulated by the Jews, and the Qur'an is described as deceitful.

Therefore, the author of the book will be someone other than the true God; but he cannot be [anyone] except the God of this world. For this God is he who blinds the minds of unbelievers... This God, or prince of this world [i.e., Satan], encountered the man Muhammad through [the person who from the beginning is a liar] of some *one* of his own angels who assumed the appearance of light and perhaps the name "Gabriel." [This God found] that the idolater [Muhammad], who was worshiping Venus and lusting after all the things of this world, was most suitable for his purpose. And through Muhammad, chiefly, and his successors he put together the deceitful Koran. Moreover, to Muhammad he attached heretical Christians and perverse Jews as counselors suitable for his purpose.²³

²¹ For the discussion on Riccoldo, see nn. 11–15

²² Hopkins, p. 968; CA, prologus, 10: "Unde si nec Moyses nec Mahumetus umquam, dum in hoc mundo essent, saepe dictum bonum viderint – deum enim nemo vidit umquam –, quomodo tunc aliis iter ad ipsum pandere potuerunt? Esto autem, quod sermones aliquos eis immissos publicassent, qui figurabant seu significabant deum et viam ad ipsum, tamen ipsi illos exponere non potuissent neque alius homo."

²³ CA, I, 1 – 2, 23; Hopkins, p. 976.

In light of such harsh denigrations of Mohammad and the Qur'an, how can any serious scholar identify Cusanus as a proponent of dialogue or tolerance of Islam? There is more to it. Cusanus' denunciations of Muhammad are telling, whether they relate to Muhammad's ignorance, his pursuit of exaltation, or his ignorance of the law of Abraham. Cusanus employed even harsher denigrations of Muhammad and the Qur'an. The theme of Muhammad acting under Satan's influence and guidance and thus composing the deceitful Qur'an is striking: Satan is the author of the Qur'an, and Muhammad, a worshiper of Venus and lust, was found as the right man to accept it. Heretical Christians and perverse Jews also played their part: Christian truths were implanted in the Qur'an not due to any pro-Christian attitude but as a deception.

In the latter part of CA, particularly in Chapter 19 of Book II, entitled 'An Invective against the Qur'an,' Cusanus engages in particularly harsh denigrations of Muhammad and the Qur'an.²⁴ Muhammad's ignorance and pursuit of exaltation are emphasized; Islam is deemed a religion of the sword.

Sharp anti-Muhammad statement also appears in a work Cusanus wrote before CA. In a sermon given in 1455, Cusanus refers to the Book of Revelation, chapter 13, and identifies Muhammad as the beast, preceding the Antichrist: "The first beast rising up from the water or the sea can be understood as Muhammad [...] and the second is the Antichrist [...]."²⁵

In another sermon of August 24, 1456, he praised the recent Christian victory over the Turks at Belgrade. Cusanus describes Muhammad as a "pseudo-prophet" and explains the positive references to the Gospels in the Qur'an as the beguiling deception of Satan, emphasizing the doctrinal divergence of denying the crucifixion. Thus, Muhammad praised Christ and the Gospel:

but posited false insights while promising paradisiac lust of flesh and body. And since the cross of Christ is the ultimate spiritual testimony of conceiving the Gospel [...] therefore it seems that Satan induced Mohamed's doctrine to

²⁴ Cf. Hopkins, pp. 1045–1048; CA, II, pp. 124–128 (*Invectio Contra Alkoranum*); M. Watanabe, *Cusanus, Islam...*, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁵ Nicolaus Cusanus, *Sermo CCX, Iterum Venturus est*, [in:] *Opera Omnia*, Causanus Portal, <https://urts99.uni-trier.de/cusanus/content/werke.php> [access: 15.06.2023], pp. 38–39. The translation into English is mine: "Primam bestiam de aqua seu mari ascendentem posse Mahimmet intelligi [...] et secundum bestiam esse antichristum [...]." See: M. Van der Meer, *World Without End: Nicholas of Cusa's View of Time and Eternity*, [in:] *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt*, serie: *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions* 142, eds. A. Alasdair et al., Leiden 2009, p. 321.

people so that the head of evil, the son of perdition, would spring out of it and constitute himself as the enemy of the cross of Christ.²⁶

Pim Valkenberg, as well as others, prefer to ignore these sermons.²⁷ It does not fit their agenda; such recalcitrant texts might disrupt their utopian dreams of a universal religious peace conceived in the image of selective elements of Cusanus' texts.

Of course, Cusanus was neither the first nor the harshest polemicist denouncing Islam's Prophet and its holy book. As a rule, Christians did not and still do not acknowledge the legitimacy of Muhammad as a prophet.²⁸ However, the groundbreaking *Nostra Aetate* (1965) took a considerable theological step toward Islam. It asks Catholics to enter into dialogue with believers of other religions to preserve and promote positive spiritual and moral ends and the socio-cultural values that are to be found among non-Christians. Concerning Muslims in particular, it stipulates:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself; merciful and all powerful, the Creator of heaven

²⁶ Nicolaus Cusanus, *Sermo CCXL Laudans invocabo*, [in:] Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae litterarum heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita: Sermones IV (1455-1463)*, Hrsg. R. Klibanek, H. Bascour, Michigan 2005, p. 229. The translation into English is mine: "[...] sed apposuit falsum intellectum promittens paradisum voluptatis secundum carnem et delicias corporales. Et quoniam crux Christi est ultimum testimonium spiritualis intelligentiae evangelii [...] ideo doctrinam Mahometh diabolus videtur hominibus persuasisse, ut ex ipsa veniret caput malitiae filius perditionis, qui se inimicum crucis Christi constitueret." See: J. Hankins, *Renaissance Crusaders...*, op. cit., p. 128 (n. 49). For an analysis of this sermon and others, see: T.M. Izbicki, N. Ron, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Ottoman Threat to Christendom*, "Medieval Encounters" 28 (2022), pp. 129–147. See also: J.W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521*, Durham 1979, p. 234, nn. 156–157; W.A. Euler, *A Critical Survey of Cusanus' Writings on Islam*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic...*, op. cit., p. 27.

²⁷ Cf. W.G.B.M. Valkenberg, *A Faithful Christian Interpretation of Islam*, [in:] *Faithful Interpretations: Truth and Islam in Catholic Theology of Religions*, eds. P. Geister, G. Haltonsten, Washington DC 2020, pp. 165–182; W.G.B.M. Valkenberg, *Una Religio in Rituum Varietate: Religious Pluralism, the Qur'an, and Nicholas of Cusa*, [in:] *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic...*, op. cit., pp. 30–48.

²⁸ Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther provide historical examples. On Erasmus' harsh rejection of Islam and Muhammad, see: N. Ron, *Erasmus and the "Other: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples*, London 2019, pp. 30–32. On Luther's different approach – his interest in Islam was unusual in his time – see L. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, New York 2018, pp. 373–378.

and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.²⁹

However, the *Nostra Aetate* avoids the issue of the prophethood of Mohammad. The recognition, or at least the non-rejection, of the prophethood of Muhammad was and still is an essential Islamic requisite. A contemporary Muslim scholar has clarified: “There is no possibility for dialogue unless Christians consider the prophethood of Muhammad.”³⁰ As much as its significance is clear to Christian theologians, this issue is still excluded and untouched by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, as Daniel Madigan puts it:

The question of Muhammad is without doubt the most avoided question in Muslim-Christian relations. One finds no mention of this Prophet of Islam, for example, in the otherwise laudatory comments made about Muslims and their faith in the groundbreaking documents of the Second Vatican Council. They

²⁹ Declaratio De Ecclesiae Habitudine Ad Religiones Non-Christianas. *Nostra Aetate*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_lt.html [access: 15.06.2023], n. 3; “Ecclesia cum aestimatione quoque Muslimos respicit qui unicum Deum adorant, viventem et subsistentem, misericordem et omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae (5), homines allocutum, cuius occultis etiam decretis toto animo se submittere student, sicut Deo se submitit Abraham ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert. Iesum, quem quidem ut Deum non agnoscunt, ut prophetam tamen venerantur, matremque eius virginalem honorant Mariam et aliquando eam devote etiam invocant. Diem insuper iudicii expectant cum Deus omnes homines resuscitados remunerabit. Exinde vitam moralem aestimant et Deum maxime in oratione, eleemosynis et ieiunio colunt.”

³⁰ M. Aydin, *Modern Western Christian Theological Understandings of Muslims Since the Second Vatican Council*, Washington DC 2002, pp. 30–31. For a comprehensive discussion of the issue, see: A.B. Moreland, *Speak, Lord, Your Servant Is Listening: Muhammad and Christian Prophecy*, [in:] *Faithful Interpretations...*, op. cit., pp. 128–149; D.A. Kerr, ‘He Walked in the Path of the prophets’: *Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad*, in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, [in:] *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, eds. Y.Y. Haddad, W.Z. Haddad, Gainesville FL 1995, pp. 426–446.

give no sense at all that this faith has a founder and a history. And since that time, the hesitancy about responding could hardly be said to have diminished.³¹

Thus, based on Cusanus' denouncements of Mohammad, one may reasonably assume that if there had been any Islamic reaction to CA, it would have been expressed unfriendly, to put it mildly. A medieval source provides an indication. Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160–1240), Bishop of Acre and historian, joined the crusaders near Damietta in the summer of 1219 and reported with admiration in his *Historia Occidentalis* on Francis of Assisi's encounter with Sultan al-Kamil. Among other things, he wrote:

In fact, the Saracens willingly listen to all these Lesser Brothers when they preach about faith in Christ and the Gospel teaching, but only as long as in their preaching they do not speak against Muhammad as a liar and an evil man. When they do speak in such a manner, the Saracens irreverently put them to the lash and savagely expel them from their cities; they would kill them, if God did not miraculously protect them.³²

Despite the differences in time, place, and historical context that separate these Franciscans and Cusanus, the fundamental picture of Christians striving to convert Muslims and denigrating Muhammad is essentially the same. There is no reason to think that Cusanus' harsh denigrations of Muhammad would not have provoked (hypothetical) Muslim readers to react similarly to the kind of reaction described by de Vitry.

Indeed, Medieval or early modern Christians would not have responded with less outrage if they were to have read a text proclaiming that Satan guided Jesus Christ and that the Gospels were deceitful.

Cusanus and the Jews

Thomas Izbicki has studied the issue of Cusanus' decree that Jews be marked with a yellow badge. Izbicki's conclusion is that we should not place Cusanus among the most incendiary of his contemporaries. Thus, even Cusanus' decree

³¹ D. Madigan, *Jesus and Muhammad: The Sufficiency of Prophecy*, [in:] *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective*, ed. M. Ipgrave, London 2005, pp. 90–99, here: 90. Also cited by A.B. Moreland, *Speak, Lord...*, op. cit., p. 144.

³² Cited from J.V. Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, Oxford 2009, p. 20.

to mark the Jews with a yellow badge, as analysed by Izbicki, was no more than “a piece of legalese, not a flamboyant piece of rabble rousing in the tradition of Vincent Ferrer and Bernardino of Siena.”³³ Izbicki also refers briefly to Cusanus’ presentation of the Jews in CA: “Building on established ideas about the Prophet, Cusanus blames some of his errors on Jewish advisers, whose influence waxed and waned with time. Despite these repetitions of old polemics, Cusanus is quick to play Jews and Muslims off against one another.”³⁴ Unfortunately, this allusion is all too brief and much unsatisfactory. A more comprehensive and detailed analysis is provided below.

A collected volume that appeared in 2022 purports to shed new light on the development of the perception of the ‘Other’ within the different philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions of Christian and Islamic thought in the late Middle Ages and the early modern era. It also proclaims “the flourishing tradition of a constructed interreligious dialogue such as that between Christians and Jews.”³⁵ Within this volume, Walter Andreas Euler constructs ‘Dialogue and Toleration in Cusa.’³⁶ Euler boasts of Cusanus’ “curiosity and the interest in foreign things,” which apparently extended so far that in a sermon from Christmas 1430 Cusanus announced proudly “that he has talked with Jews about the Trinity and the Incarnation.”³⁷

Be that as it may, Euler chose not to refer to Cusanus’ polemical CA, in which the Jews are blackened and degraded. According to Cusanus, Muhammad’s evils and wrongdoings resulted from manipulations and deceptions perpetrated by the Jews, as expressed in the legend that Sergius, the Nestorian monk, dictated the Qur’an.

But three very clever Jews attached themselves to Muhammad in order to turn him aside, lest he become perfect; and they induced him to various evils. But after Muhammad’s death... these [three] Jews approached Alis – son of Abitalip – to whom Muhammad had sent his collection [of precepts], and persuaded him to

³³ T. Izbicki, *Cusanus and the Jews*, [in:] *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicolas of Cusa*, ed. I. Bocken, Leiden 2004, pp. 119–130 (here: 130). See also: M. Rutz, “Das Judendekret” des Nikolaus von Kues als Strategisches Dokument im bemühen um eine reform der Christen, “Verbum” 15 (2012), pp. 28–40.

³⁴ T. Izbicki, *Cusanus and the Jews*, op. cit., p. 120.

³⁵ *Tolerance and Concepts of Otherness in Medieval Philosophy*, eds. M.W. Dunne, S. Gottlöber, Turnhout 2022.

³⁶ W.A. Euler, *Dialogue and Toleration in Cusa*, [in:] *Tolerance and Concepts...*, op. cit., pp. 297–307.

³⁷ W.A. Euler, *Dialogue and Toleration...*, op. cit., p. 307.

elevate himself unto a prophet, even as Muhammad too [had elevated himself]. And regarding Muhammad's book, they added and deleted what they wanted to. It seems, then, that at the beginning Muhammad was firmly grounded by Sergius, so that he was a Christian and observed the Christian law. The Jews were not able to turn him aside from that way. But in order to hold [him] back [therefrom] as much as they could, they added those [passages] through which Muhammad seemed to be a prophet of his own sect and through which he gave credence to the Old Testament no less than to the Gospel.³⁸

Thus, these three Jews approached Alis, son of Abitalip, to whom Muhammad had sent the book, the Qur'an, and persuaded him to declare himself a prophet. Historically, Ali ibn Abi Talib (601-661) is the central figure in Shia Islam and is regarded as the rightful successor to Muhammad by Shia Muslims. However, soon after the death of Muhammad (632), a dispute broke out over his succession. Most of Muhammad's followers wanted the community of Muslims to determine who would succeed him. However, a smaller group thought someone from his family should take up his mantle. They favored Ali, who was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah. Essentially, this caused the historic split and the violent rivalry between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which continues to this day. Who is responsible for this clash, according to CA?

The answer is: the collaboration of cunning, perverse Jews and an ignorant Muhammad, as Cusanus bluntly expressed it: "...if Muhammad was deceived by the Jews who assisted him [and] who persuaded him that the sister of Aaron was Mary the mother of Christ, then they were also able in many [other] respects to deceive him, as being one who was ignorant of the history of [those] times."³⁹

In the same anti-Jewish spirit, Cusanus states further: "Therefore [let] these things [suffice] regarding the law of, and the way of, Abraham. In all likelihood, the Jews added [such things] to the Qur'an after [Muhammad's] death; for Muhammad's collection was in their hands, as was mentioned earlier."⁴⁰ Thus, the Jews were responsible for blurring the Christian core of the original Qur'an and, by implication, are to blame for the hostility between Islam and Christianity.

[Muslims] have been led astray by cunning and perverse Jews who were blasphemers of God... After Muhammad's death, before those Jews who attached themselves to Muhammad and who had the collection of his commandments in

³⁸ CA, prologus, III 11-12; Hopkins, p. 969.

³⁹ CA, III, 12-15; Hopkins, p. 1087.

⁴⁰ CA, III, 227; Hopkins, p. 1090.

their control handed the collection over to Ali (to whom Muhammad ordered it given), they inserted those [statements] about Abraham (whose descendants they pride themselves on being) and many other [statements,] which remained in the Koran in that form.⁴¹

Thus, the “cunning and perverse Jews,” as Cusanus labels them, deceitfully added to the Qur’an elements of Abrahamic origins, such as the obligation of circumcision in particular and the notion that Muhammad himself was circumcised. The allegation that the Jews corrupted the Qur’an, twisted it, and blurred its Christian core is emphasized and repeated by Cusanus several times in CA.

In using the Jews to stain and denounce Muhammad and the Qur’an, Cusanus was not original. He relied on a received tradition concerning the Jews’ meddling in the formation of the Qur’an. Thus, relying on those problematic – as far as factual history is concerned – legendary stories, Cusanus portrayed Mohammad as an ignorant who was guided by Satan, and manipulated by the wily Jews. In referring to these legendary stories, Barbara Roggema observes: “I should note that the term ‘legend’ is, as such, a choice of modern scholars. It is not a term used by the people who transmitted the texts and to whom, judging from the names that they gave it, the Legend represented a piece of history.”⁴² However, by interweaving this extra-qur’anic tradition unquestionably and unselectively in his writing, Cusanus reestablishes these hostile stories. The interreligious relations that he presents here are entirely not of the dialogical kind.

Cusanus and the Crusade

Cusanus was strongly attached to the crusading project of his time. Apparently, the respect and appreciation we tend to feel for Cusanus, due to his philosophical works and the scholarly reputation he earned, make it difficult for us to identify and admit the anti-Muslim nature of his CA as well as his devotion to the crusade. For the fact is that he worked with Pius II to set in motion a largescale crusade against the Ottoman Turks which, if successful, would then have attempted to take Jerusalem.⁴³

⁴¹ CA, III, 228–229; Hopkins, p. 1090.

⁴² B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*, Leiden 2009, p. 6.

⁴³ Elsewhere I show that the objective of Pope Pius II’s crusade, which came close to realization in 1464, was not just the retaking of Constantinople but the conquest of Jerusalem as

At the Diet of Regensburg (1454), Cusanus intensively deliberated on a future crusade against the Turks. We know that during his earlier visit to Constantinople (1437) he had acquired knowledge of the city's military settings. At the Diet of Regensburg, he channelled recollections of his visit to Constantinople into useful military information. Pope Pius II informs us:

The Cardinal of San Pietro [Cusanus], who had visited Constantinople several times and seen almost all of Greece, spoke gravely and at length about the lost city's site, the people's character, the power of the Turks, and how to conduct the war. And though he declared that the Greeks had merited their sufferings since they had not wanted to follow the Roman Church and had fraudulently feigned the union, he vehemently urged the Christians to avenge the injury to the Saviour.⁴⁴

Like other pieces of evidence that testify to Cusanus' involvement in setting a crusade in motion, this fragment passes unnoticed in Euler's account. Unfortunately, other scholars have also chosen to ignore the non-irenical aspects of Cusanus' acts and writings.

Cusanus was supportive of and involved in the efforts of the Pope to set the crusade in motion. Although nominated papal legate in Rome, Cusanus was in Mantua during the congress that Pius II convened (1459), at least at a particular stage of that congress. According to a description by the Pope, Cusanus took part in welcoming Albert, the margrave of Brandenburg, a glorified combatant and general (the 'German Achilles') who was about to empower Pius II's crusading expedition. Thus, Albert's arrival in Mantua was essential to fulfilling Pius II's crusading plan, of which Cusanus was a loyal partner. Moreover, Cusanus demonstrated his support in a gesture. When Albert came to Mantua, "the cardinal of *San Pietro* left the ranks and went out to meet him," and the Pope

well. See: N. Ron, *Pius II, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Crusade to retake Constantinople and Jerusalem*, [in:] *Narratives of Peace in Religious Discourses: Global Perspectives in the Early Modern Era*, eds. L. Battista, M. Fallica, B. Tramontano, Sheffield 2024 (upcoming).

⁴⁴ *Collected Reports on Diplomatic Missions, 1447-1455, of Enea Silvio Piccolomini*, ed. and transl. M. von Cotta-Schönberg, Chişinău 2021 [133], p. 647. See also: the quote in N. Housley, *Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Crusade: Conciliar, Imperial, and Papal Authority*, "Church History" 86 (2017), pp. 643-667 (p. 664, n. 93): "gravely and at length, he [Cusanus] addressed the location of the fallen city, the ways of its people, the power of the Turks and their military methods. And while he did not deny that the Greeks deserved all they had suffered, he nevertheless exhorted the Christians vehemently to avenge the injuries to their savior."

praised Albert “for his prompt and generous promises of support against the Turks” and endowed him with money and expensive gifts.⁴⁵

Norman Housley ascribes to Cusanus a crusading desire even before the Diet of Regensburg (1454), already in the 1430s.⁴⁶ Indeed, at the Council of Basel (1431–1449), Cusanus undertook the study of Islam. His partner was John of Segovia, who would distinguish himself by commissioning a trilingual translation of the Qur’an (now lost).⁴⁷ Segovia did advocate the peaceable conversion of the Muslims to Christianity rather than resorting to war or crusade. Moreover, Anne Marie Wolf has shown that Segovia not only rejected crusading but created “an anticrusading discourse.”⁴⁸ The chronology suggests that Cusanus’ study of Islam was not detached from the desirable crusade. His devotion to peace was much lesser than that of Segovia.

Nevertheless, a year after DPF was completed, Cusanus and the Spanish theologian John of Segovia exchanged letters presenting a favorable viewpoint on the possibility of religious persuasion concerning Muslims. Cusanus expressed the hope that Segovia had arguments, discussed by the two at the Council of Basel, which could persuade the Turks to accept the doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁹ It proved to be an illusion. Was it the understanding that the Turks would not become Christians that drove Cusanus to become a crusade activist? Possibly. Be that as it may, from the Diet of Regensburg onwards we find him involved in preparing a crusade against the Turks.

Cusanus was about to join Pius II in Ancona when he died in Todi on August 11, 1464. The Pope died in Ancona three days later while vainly awaiting the launch of his crusade. Arguably, Cusanus’ support of the crusade was not just the result of following the commands of his Pope. On the contrary, his wholehearted participation stemmed from ideological persuasion. In particular,

⁴⁵ Cf. Pius II, *Commentarii*, III, 45, 3: “Huic Mantuam venienti cardinalis Sancti Petri extra ordinem occurrit [...] laudavitque magnificis verbis, qui sua opera contra Turchos alacri et magno animo promississet.” The gifts are mentioned here too.

⁴⁶ Cf. N. Housley, *Aeneas Silvius...*, op. cit., pp. 559, 662.

⁴⁷ Cf. U. Roth, *Juan of Segovia’s Translation of the Qur’an*, “al-qantara. Revista de estudios arabes” 35 (2014), pp. 555–78; T.M. Izbicki, N. Ron, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Ottoman...*, op. cit., pp. 129–147.

⁴⁸ A.M. Wolf, *Converting Fellow Christians*, [in:] A.M. Wolf, *Juan de Segovia and the Fight for Peace: Christians and Muslims in the Fifteenth Century*, Notre Dame IN 2014, pp. 129–174; N. Housley, *Aeneas Silvius...*, op. cit., p. 662, n. 83.

⁴⁹ Cf. Nicolaus Cusanus, *Opera omnia*, vol. 7: DPF, eds. E. Hoffmann, R. Klibansky, Hamburg 1932, p. 97: “Spes est quod omnes Teucrici acquiescerent fidei sanctissimae Trinitatis ex rationibus tactis in scripto reverendissimae paternitatis vestrae, quas et alias Basiliae audivi a vobis...”

his active participation in the Congress of Mantua, even if brief, is telling and its significance should not be underrated.⁵⁰

Ascribing Interreligious Dialogue to Cusanus

Cusanus scholars tend to ascribe ‘interreligious dialogue’ to him. Too pre-occupied with admiring Cusanus’ irenic dialogue DPF, they either ignore or belittle significant issues, such as Cusanus’ active engagement in preparations for a crusade, harsh polemical CA, which rejects the prophethood of Mohammad, or the harsh anti-Mohammad expressions in Cusanus’ sermons.⁵¹ By activating their ‘agenda filters’ to devalue or entirely wipe away anything not in line with DPF, they defend and cultivate the prevalent narrative and their cherished hero.

I mentioned above the construction of ‘Dialogue and Toleration in Cusa’ by W.A. Euler.⁵² This construction is achieved by leaving CA out of the analysis and by ignoring the aborted crusade that Cusanus supported. By so doing, Euler wipes away insurmountable obstructions to actual interreligious dialogue, such as linking Mohammad and the deceitful Qur’an to Satan. Thus, with no reference whatsoever to CA and the abovementioned crusade, Cusanus comes out candidly dialogical and tolerant.⁵³ Euler’s piece is a standard instance of the turning of a blind eye to Cusanus’ bellicose activity and to his harsh polemical CA, neither of which fits the agenda of fashioning the received image of Cusanus as a dove of peace and a champion of interreligious dialogue and tolerance.

⁵⁰ Such an underestimation is implied from T.M. Izbicki, *Juan De Torquemada...*, op. cit., p. 107: “Evidence for Cusanus’ support of the anti-Turkish crusade following 1453 is sparse [...]. Cusanus was at Mantua briefly, probably before taking his place as papal vicar *in temporalibus* for Rome in 1459.”

⁵¹ E.g., M. Costigliolo, *Interreligious Dialogue before and after Nicholas of Cusa: an Exegetical Approach*, “*Mirabilia Journal*” 19 (2014), pp. 63–78, describes DPF as “a model of interreligious dialogue” (p. 73), while totally ignoring the CA and all the other issues I have mentioned. In M. Costigliolo, *Islam e cristianesimo: mondi di differenze nel Medioevo*, Genova 2012, she does refer to CA but avoids dealing with polemical issues such as the alignment of Mohammad and Satan and the charge that the Qur’an is deceitful. Furthermore, she ignores the crusade and Cusanus’ active role in setting it in motion, which chronologically matches the appearance of the *Cribratio*, thus casting serious doubts on any judgment of Cusanus’ view of Islam as dialogic or tolerant.

⁵² On Euler’s work, see n. 36.

⁵³ Euler is well aware of CA’s harshness and contrast to DPF and discusses it in former works: W.A. Euler, *A Critical Survey...*, op. cit.; W.A. Euler, *An Italian Painting from the Late Fifteenth Century and the Cribratio Alkorani of Nicholas of Cusa*, [in:] *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. P.J. Casarella, Washington DC 2006, pp. 127–142.

In case it appears that the exception is treated as the rule, here are some more examples. Kate Waggoner Karchner concludes that, following Riccoldo da Montecroce's *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, Cusanus' CA attempted to create an "interreligious dialogue" – the term is at the core of her paper.⁵⁴ To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time in the history of Cusanus scholarship that Riccoldo da Montecroce's *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, a fierce anti-Islamic polemic, has been described as inspiring tolerance and interreligious dialogue. Only magical scholarship can so readily turn intolerance into tolerance. Thus, a magical excuse is constructed: while Cusanus took part in setting a crusade in motion, nevertheless

he focused his efforts and his writings much more intently on finding a dialogic way for Christians to approach Islam than on promoting crusades directly. Both churchmen [Pope Pius II and Cardinal Cusanus] seem to have seen dialogue as a more productive approach to Islam...⁵⁵

As if Pius II did not strive during most of his life to lead a crusade but to engage in a dialogue with Muslims. Magical scholarship can also turn a Satanic Mohammad and his deceitful Qur'an, Cusanus' stated convictions, into a dialogic way to approach Islam.

And there is more magic. Valkenberg writes:

⁵⁴ See: K. Waggoner Karchner, *Deciphering the Qur'an in late medieval Europe: Riccoldo da Montecroce, Nicholas of Cusa and the text-centred development of interreligious dialogue*, "Journal of Medieval History" 46 (2020), pp. 156–178. Other researchers also link Cusanus to 'interreligious dialogue.' See: M. Halff, *Did Nicholas of Cusa Talk with Muslims? Revisiting Cusanus' Sources for The Cribatio Alkorani and Interfaith Dialogue*, "Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval" 26 (2019), pp. 29–58, referring to Cusanus' visit to Constantinople in 1437, axiomatically assumes that CA is an attempt at interreligious dialogue. He argues that Cusanus relied on a merchant of Venice who allegedly served as an inspiration for Cusanus' idea that laymen could play a critical role in interreligious dialogue. M. Costigliolo, *The interreligious dialogue in de docta ignorantia of Nicholas of Cusa*, "Medieval Encounters" 20 (2014), pp. 217–237, shows how DPF is methodically-philosophically linked to Cusanus' *De docta ignorantia* by means of the so-called coincidence of opposites. But Costigliolo does not refer to the different nature of CA, nor does she draw attention to the military-historical circumstances that affected Cusanus and stimulated his anti-Ottoman crusading spirit. J.V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*, Princeton 2019, p. 90, attributes to Cusanus an essentially positive approach toward Islam.

⁵⁵ K. Waggoner Karchner, *Deciphering the Qur'an...*, op. cit., p. 177.

Nicholas proposes to react not with weapons but with words. First, he develops this unique utopian vision of the nations of the world coming together under the guidance of the Word – Christ – to establish peace of faith (*DPF*). This vision of a council of nations, or rather religions, sounds very modern. It is indeed exciting to consider the idea that Nicholas received the main inspiration for his famous proposal to consider *una religio in rituum varietate* (one faith in a variety of rites) from a Muslim source during one of the at least three times that he consulted the Qur'an.⁵⁶

But of course, this is not really about magic. It is about scholars with a definite theological agenda sweeping aside inconvenient historical data. Did Cusanus propose to react not with weapons but with words? Valkenberg's agenda prompts him to say that he did, but the historical evidence indicates otherwise. *DPF* was published in December 1453. In April 1454, just a few months later, Cusanus participated in discussions on a crusade against the Turks.⁵⁷ As for Cusanus' "council of religions," it is Valkenberg's utopia rather than Cusanus'. According to the Cardinal, besides their belief in the Almighty, all religions should accept Christ and the Trinity, whether called "the Word" or otherwise (in *DPF*). Essentially, Cusanus' so-called "utopia" is not different from the old Christian-Medieval desire for non-Christians to convert and join Christianity. *DPF* explicitly reflects the pursuit of "peace of the faith," i.e., Christianity. It is concerned with an exclusively Christian peace, i.e., a peace of Christians, for Christians – actually, *concordia*. Non-Christians, such as Muslims, can enjoy this peace – if they abandon their religion and join Christianity (albeit "a toned-down Christianity," as Izbicki puts it). And this vision of peace does not necessarily mean an anti-war or anti-crusade stance on the part of Cusanus, as Norman Housley has rightly observed.⁵⁸ Thus, Cusanus' *The Peace of the Faith* is Cusanus' peace of the Christian faith, which is based on its superiority over other faiths. Valkenberg, guided by wishful ecumenical thinking, proclaims:

Cusanus has given us a very important hermeneutical principle that makes the relation between Christians and Muslims truly an interreligious relation and

⁵⁶ W.G.B.M. Valkenberg, *A Faithful Christian Interpretation...*, op. cit., pp. 170–171.

⁵⁷ On Cusanus' participation in a discussion dealing with conquering Constantinople, see: n. 44.

⁵⁸ Cusanus' crusading desire was manifested even before 1453, already in the 1430s, see: N. Housley, *Aeneas Silvius...*, op. cit., pp. 559, 662.

thus fulfils the promise made in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* when it says that the Church “regards with esteem the Muslims.”⁵⁹

To attribute to Cusanus an attempt at interreligious dialogue and link his attitude towards Islam to the *Nostra Aetate* is fantastic. The scorn and denigrations that Cusanus – in his CA in particular and in quite a few of his sermons – casts at Muhammad and the Qur’an rule out such an attribution as fantasy. The *Nostra Aetate* is as far as can be from Cusanus’ degradations of Islam. The whole essence of this doctrinal document is an atonement for earlier hostile attitudes. Reconciling Cusanus’ take on Islam with *Nostra Aetate* is a crude insult to the second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII.

The list of biased Cusanus scholars includes a few more names. James Muldoon argues that Christian rulers believed in crusades that would lead to Cusa’s vision of universal concordance.⁶⁰ This dominant narrative presents us with a visionary Cusanus, who gave the model for universal reconciliation, which kings and popes attempted to materialize, often by force and crusade. Indeed, Cusanus is almost always positioned as a theorist and visionary, not as an active participant in a bellicose papal or royal initiative. Accordingly, only Cusanus’ ecumenical position and involvement in Constantinople in 1437 in an attempt to reunite the Eastern Church with Rome are emphasized. Furthermore, and in Muldoon’s words:

Cusa seems to have envisioned a peaceful path to, ultimately, the concordance of all humankind, a naturally and divinely ordained goal. The papal letters, however, took a harsher position: it would be necessary to fight against the traditional enemies of Christendom in the course of creating the desired harmony, and it might be necessary to use some force to achieve a greater good, the harmonious world order that would enable all humankind to achieve their nature and their supernatural goals.⁶¹

The theme of harmony is dominant in this kind of writing (e.g., “we meet here an eschatological vision of interreligious harmony”; quoted in n. 12), as is the tacit marginalization of Cusanus’ active involvement as Pius II’s lieutenant in striving to set a crusade in motion. A combination of blinkered admiration and

⁵⁹ N. Housley, *Aeneas Silvius...*, op. cit., pp. 167, 181 (respectively).

⁶⁰ Cf. J. Muldoon, *Nicholas of Cusa, the Papacy, and World Order: Vision and Reality*, [in:] *Inventing Modernity in Medieval European Thought, DPF. 1100–DPF. 1550*, eds. B. Koch, C.J. Nederman, Berlin–Boston 2018, pp. 171–190 (181).

⁶¹ J. Muldoon, *Nicholas of Cusa...*, op. cit., p. 184.

wishful thinking dictate a narrative in which Cusanus is positioned separately from the war leaders and portrayed as a dove of peace – despite his active and wholehearted involvement in preparations for war against the Turks.

Jozef Matula hails Cusanus as a man of reconciliation and peace, “a remarkable spirit of religious tolerance,” “Cusa is a proclinator of tolerance and the reconciliation of different religions.”⁶² Sure enough, there is no crusade in Matula’s treatment of Cusanus. Why confuse readers with facts? And such facts will only stain the treasured image of the champion of peace. Matula correctly stipulates, “it is necessary to connect DPF and other Cusa works, like *De docta ignorantia*.” Yet, he fails to mention even once CA, as if Cusanus had never written that work. A research agenda generates a blinkered narrative by ignoring Cusanus’ polemical and anti-Islamic work.

Here is another example. Miroslav Volf, in his *Allah: A Christian Response*,⁶³ takes pains to emphasize Cusanus’ positive attitude toward Islam, irrespective of any distinction between DPF and CA and basing his position primarily on the fact that both religions worship God, the one and only, and that despite the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the oneness of God is a theological truth acceptable to both faiths. Nevertheless, Volf wrongly ascribes to Cusanus a principled objection to war and an unequivocal anti-crusade stance. Regarding DPF, Volf writes, “In this text he [Cusanus] advocated what is in effect a wholesale alternative to crusade.”⁶⁴ And in a more general phrasing relating to the war against the Ottoman Turks, Volf asserts: “First, faced with a powerful enemy, Nicholas offers an alternative. It consists of argumentative engagement with Muslims. War, he believes, can never resolve issues between Christians and Muslims.”⁶⁵ Alas, Cusanus was far from being a pacifist and was actively involved in preparations for a crusade against the Turks.

Susan Gottlöber authored ‘How Tolerable is Cusa’s Tolerance? Revisiting Cusa’s Encounter with Islam’ without mentioning the word crusade (or war). Cusanus’ significant role in support of a new crusade is completely ignored. Furthermore, her work does not refer to any of Cusa’s sermons – some of which are unequivocally hostile to Islam and favor crusading. When such vistas are placed out of sight, descriptions of the *Cribratio*, as well as *De pace fidei*, as irenic readily flow into scholarly prose, with talk of “the irenic position that

⁶² J. Matula, *Two Approaches to Tolerance: Nicholas of Cusa and John Amos Comenius*, “Studia Comeniana et Historica” 95–96/46 (2016), pp. 26–40 (citations on p. 29).

⁶³ Cf. M. Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, New York 2011.

⁶⁴ M. Volf, *Allah...*, op. cit., p. 43, n. 26. Cf. W.G.B.M. Valkenberg, *Una Religio...*, op. cit., pp. 30–31, n. 2, who straightforwardly follows Volf, is wrong too.

⁶⁵ M. Volf, *Allah...*, op. cit., p. 53.

Cusa displays in all three works (if we include the letter to Juan de Segovia) as “a central theme” in his thinking.⁶⁶ It is hardly a surprise to discover that, together with M.W. Dune, Gottlöber edited the volume in which W.A. Euler constructed ‘Dialogue and Toleration in Cusa.’⁶⁷

Conclusion

In CA, Cusanus harshly denigrates Muhammad and rejects his prophethood. One may ask oneself, how would Muslims, whether laymen or clerics, react to such a representation of their religion. Clearly, they would consider it offending and humiliating, to say the least, and in no way promoting ‘interreligious dialogue.’ Had CA been read by Muslims, it would have increased conflict and hostility. Significantly, it was intended for Pope Pius II and possibly read by a handful of interested scholars and prelates. Present Muslim scholars doubt the practicability of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims due to Christianity’s unrecognition of the prophethood of Muhammad. Most probably, 15th-century Muslims would not have reacted differently to CA and its rejection of Islam’s prophet.

As for the Jews, they are not just degraded but also presented as responsible for dragging Muhammed away from his alleged Christian origin. Even if based on a received tradition repeated by Cusanus, how can this be considered an attempt to create an ‘interreligious dialogue’? The opposite is true. In his CA, Cusanus, whether fully aware of it or not, divorces religions from each other. In particular, Islam is distanced from Christianity.

Cusanus scholars have demonstrated bias and an agenda that projects their own ideology into their narratives, ignoring an entire corpus of primary sources, whether CA or Cusanus’ sermons, in order to maintain unshaken a cherished narrative. Such a bias results unavoidably in a grave historiographical misrepresentation, to say the least.

⁶⁶ Cf. S. Gottlöber, *How Tolerable is Cusa’s Tolerance? Revisiting Cusa’s Encounter with Islam*, “Entangled Religions” 8 (2019) (unpaged), paragraphs 23, 54, 57.

⁶⁷ Cf. S. Gottlöber, *How Tolerable is Cusa’s Tolerance...*, op. cit., n. 35.

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