Nicholas of Cusa and Islam
Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions

Edited by

Andrew Colin Gow (Edmonton, Alberta)

In cooperation with

Sylvia Brown (Edmonton, Alberta)
Falk Eisermann (Berlin)
Berndt Hamm (Erlangen)
Johannes Heil (Heidelberg)
Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Tucson, Arizona)
Martin Kaufhold (Augsburg)
Erik Kwakkel (Leiden)
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Christopher Ocker (San Anselmo and Berkeley, California)

Founding Editor

Heiko A. Oberman †

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Morimichi Watanabe (1926-2012)
We dedicate this volume to the memory of Morimichi Watanabe (1926–2012). In virtue of his scholarship and organizational skills, Mori was the dean of Cusanus studies in America. His research centered on Cusanus from his first book, *The Political Ideas of Nicholas of Cusa, with Special Reference to De concordantia catholica* (Droz, 1963), up to his last, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Companion to His Life and His Times* (Ashgate, 2011). Mori also guided the American Cusanus Society as its President for twenty-five years (1983–2008), and remained active as President Emeritus and editor of the Society’s *Newsletter* until his death. For his vision and persuasive leadership, Mori was affectionately known as the Society’s Shogun—a title that he resisted, but that would not go away because the evidence was simply too strong. Under his leadership, the Society grew from an informal group sponsoring Cusanus sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo into an organization with an internationally prized *Newsletter*, a vigorous publication program, and biennial conferences at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. The 2012 Gettysburg conference on “Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages” was also dedicated to Mori. Both the conference and this book continue his life-long work as a scholar and the guiding genius of the American Cusanus Society. Indeed, our book witnesses to this legacy by publishing Mori’s article “Cusanus, Islam, and Religious Tolerance” at the start of Part I. This is especially fitting since Mori was thinking and writing about these issues long before the rest of us. As he notes with characteristic modesty, the article revisits the themes of a paper he presented at the landmark 1964 Cusanus conference in Bressanone, though he hopes that he has “gained more insight into the subject since that time.” The article leaves no doubt on this score. Mori wrote it for the 2003 meeting of the Japanese Cusanus Society, and later translated it into English. It appears here in print for the first time.
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Asma Afsaruddin
is Professor of Islamic Studies and Chairperson of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is the author and/or editor of six books, including Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and The First Muslims: History and Memory (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2008). Her research has been funded by, among others, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which named her a Carnegie Scholar in 2005.

Tamara Albertini
is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, specializing in Renaissance and Islamic thought. She is also the Director of the Islamic Studies Certificate. Within Islamic philosophy her publications include: “Mystical Landscapes—Places of the Mind. Emptiness and Plenitude in Islamic Philosophy,” in Labirinti della mente, ed. Grazia Marchianò (2012); “Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in al-Ghazzali and Descartes,” Philosophy East and West (2005); and “The Seductiveness of Certainty. Fundamentalists’ Destruction of Islam’s Intellectual Legacy,” Philosophy East and West (2003).

Knut Alfsvåg
was born in 1955 and graduated from the Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo. He is professor of systematic theology at the School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway, and has written on apophatic theology and the understanding of God.

Paul Richard Blum
is T. J. Higgins, S. J., Chair in Philosophy at Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, USA. He obtained his PhD in Munich and his habilitation at Freie Universität Berlin. Among his recent publications are Giordano Buno—An Introduction (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), Studies on Early Modern Aristotelianism (Leiden: Brill, 2012), and Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

Thomas E. Burman
is Distinguished Professor of the Humanities in the Department of History at the University of Tennessee, and is the author of Religious Polemic and the

Marica Costigliolo
received her PhD in Political Thought at the University of Genoa. She is the author of Islam e cristianesimo: mondi di differenze nel Medioevo. Il dialogo con l’Islam nell’opera di Nicola da Cusa (Genova: Genova University Press, 2012). Her research is focused on the perception of otherness in Western culture.

Donald F. Duclow
is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Gwynedd-Mercy College. He is Secretary of the American Cusanus Society, and has published widely on the Christian Neoplatonic tradition in the Middle Ages. His book Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006) includes twenty of his articles.

Walter Andreas Euler
completed his Studies in Catholic Theology in Passau and Freiburg (1981–86), and his PhD at the University of Freiburg (1990). He has been the university lecturer of Cusanus Research at the Faculty of Theology in Trier (1992), Professor in Fundamental Theology and Ecumenical Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Trier (2001), Director of the Institute of Cusanus Research in Trier (2007), Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Board of the German Cusanus Society, and Member of the Board of Advisors of the American Cusanus Society. His publications treat matters of fundamental theology, Renaissance theology, and Nicholas of Cusa.

Rita George-Tvrtković
earned her PhD from the University of Notre Dame, and is Assistant Professor of Theology at Benedictine University in Illinois, where she specializes in historical theology and medieval Christian-Muslim relations. Her publications include the monograph A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce’s Encounter with Islam (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).
Joshua Hollmann

Sandra Toenies Keating
is Associate Professor of Theology at Providence College. She earned her PhD at the Catholic University of America, and an STL at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic (PIISAI) in Rome. She has published numerous articles and a book on Muslim-Christian relations, focusing specifically on the early centuries of Islam.

Ian Christopher Levy
is Associate Professor of Theology at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island. His work focuses on medieval biblical exegesis, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology. His most recent book is Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

Jesse D. Mann
received his PhD from the University of Chicago. He is the author of numerous articles on Juan de Segovia and late medieval intellectual and ecclesiastical history. He is adjunct professor of Humanities at Montclair State University (Montclair, NJ).

Felix Resch
teaches Philosophy of Religion at the University of Freiburg, Germany, after having studied Philosophy and Theology at the Munich School of Philosophy, University of Trier, and Ibero-American University in Mexico City. His publications include his book Triunitas: Die Trinitätsspekulation des Nikolaus von Kues (Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft; Münster: Aschendorff, 2014).
Pim (Wilhelmus G.B.M.) Valkenberg
received his PhD in 1990 from the Catholic Theological University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, where he was born. After positions at the Catholic University of Nijmegen and Loyola University in Maryland, he is currently an Ordinary Professor in the area of religion and culture at the Catholic University of America. Among his major publications are Words of the Living God (2000), The Three Rings (2005), and Sharing Lights on the Way to God (2006). His major field of research is Christian-Muslim relations, both in the medieval era and the present time.
Foreword by Thomas E. Burman: Nicholas of Cusa and Peter the Venerable’s Request

As the late Morimichi Watanabe points out later in this volume, Nicholas of Cusa wrote his remarkable *Cribratio Alkorani, The Sifting of the Qurʾan*, in 1460–1461 at the request of his close friend, Pope Pius II (1458–1464). Yet I want to suggest here, at the beginning of a collection of essays about Cusanus and Islam, that we might just as well consider the *Cribratio* as the response to an invitation sent out more than three hundred years earlier, an invitation that had remained as of yet unfulfilled. For as a kind of preface to his well-known twelfth-century Latin anthology of Islamic texts, Peter the Venerable included a copy of a letter about the project that he had sent to Bernard of Clairvaux. After describing how he had located the various translators and organized their work, and after explaining that he had undertaken this project to insure that Christians recognize that Islam is the ‘feces of all the heresies,’ Peter writes that

I have notified you [Bernard] in particular about all this in order… to inspire your magnificence of learning—which God has uniquely bestowed on you in our days—to write against such a pernicious sect.1

This request tells us a great deal about Bernard’s standing in Latin Christendom in the mid-twelfth century, but is otherwise a rather curious business—or so I have long thought. Peter had gone through all the trouble to arrange for fine linguists to translate Arabic texts into Latin, including the Qurʾan and a well-informed Arab-Christian apologetic work directed at Islam, and had done so in Spain since he knew that such translators and such texts could only be found there, but then turned immediately to a northern European abbot and asked him to write against Islam using the materials that he had made available in his

influential anthology. Bernard was a towering intellect, to be sure, well known for his defense of orthodoxy, but why exactly approach him and not someone with much more immediate knowledge of Islam, such as one of the translators he had hired, or, say, Dominicus Gundassalinus, the Spanish Christian philosopher and Arabic-to-Latin translator? Moreover, what is equally intriguing is Bernard’s complete disinterest in Peter’s invitation: he never wrote anything remotely like a systematic refutation of Islam.

Peter’s request, however, went unanswered not only in his own lifetime, but also, one might argue, for many generations thereafter. For indeed, Bernard’s response to Peter’s invitation foreshadowed that of nearly all the great thinkers—all those who were seen by contemporaries to have had ‘magnificence of learning’ bestowed upon them—of the later medieval Latin-Christian world. They similarly refused to take up the invitation to write against the ‘pernicious sect’ of Islam, until we arrive at the second half of the fifteenth century, with Nicholas of Cusa’s lengthy writings on Islam. Indeed, if we page through the recently published volumes of the massive *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, we can’t help but notice that most of the great scholastic thinkers—Abelard, Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Ockham—are entirely absent. Important, indeed seminal, Latin treatises against Islam were being composed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but they were the work of quirky, marginal, and often marginalized figures whom nobody considered the leading intellects of the age—men such as Ramon Martí, a brilliant Semitic linguist from Spain who wrote two short, learned works against Islam, but then turned his back on the ‘Islamic question’ and dedicated the bulk of his scholarly work to combating Judaism. Another such figure was his fellow Iberian, Raymond Lull, who was well aware that he seemed a crackpot (*phantasticus*) in his own time, despite his immense labors to learn Arabic and develop a complex philosophical system designed to convert Muslims (and everyone else) to properly reformed Latin Christianity. Richard Southern may have been correct in his argument that the purpose of the scholastic movement was to restore and systematize all knowledge for the purpose of reforming Christendom and defending it against its enemies, but for mainstream, northern scholastic thinkers in the high and later Middle Ages this did not mean actually writ-

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2 David Thomas et al., eds., *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, 4 volumes published to date (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009–). Hereafter, *CMR*.

3 For the extensive bibliography on Martí and Lull, see respectively *CMR* 4, 381–90, 703–17. For Lull’s frank self-assessment on the eve of the Council of Vienne in 1311, see his *Phantasticus* or *Liber disputationis Petri et Raimundi*, CCCM 78, 1–30.
ing against the religion of Islam, as Peter the Venerable had asked Bernard of Clairvaux to do.4

Now it is true that a few scholastic thinkers do show up in the pages of the Christian-Muslim Relations bibliography. William of Auvergne (d. 1249) wrote against Islam in his De legibus, but the four relevant chapters hardly represent the sustained response that Peter seemed to have had in mind. Roger Bacon (d. after 1292), of course, also had much to say here and there about Muhammad and Islam in the Opus maius. Apart from them, however, scholastic authors did not find the refutation of Islamic belief and practice a compelling topic.5

Indeed, the closest thing to what Peter the Venerable was requesting—a well-informed refutation of Islam by a leading northern European thinker—were his own two works on the subject.6

Of course, many have seen Thomas Aquinas’ immense Summa contra gentiles as a treatise against Islam. This idea goes back to about a generation after his death, when the story began to circulate that Ramon de Penyafort, one-time master general of Aquinas’ Dominican order, had asked him to write a manual for missionaries to Islam, to which Aquinas responded with his summa against whatever he meant by ‘gentiles’. For many centuries this notion was widely accepted, and it has its defenders still. Yet on this issue, one must side with the series of modern scholars (including most prominently the late Dominican, René-Antoine Gauthier) who have argued that this certainly could not have been the case.7 Not only is the evidence for Penyafort’s request suspect, but, as a whole, the Summa contra gentiles contains nothing that recommends it as a guidebook for real missionaries talking to real Muslims. Aquinas only mentions Islam nine times in the entire work, and only a brief paragraph (1.6) says anything remotely substantive about the religion. Here he sneers at Muhammad for attracting followers with promises of a carnal paradise, and claims that yes, Muhammad preached some true things, but only mixed together with fables and utterly false doctrines. Most importantly, however, having made utterly

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5 On William and Roger Bacon see CMR 4, 288–94, 457–70.
7 He discusses this issue at a number of points in his many works, but comprehensively presents his views in his Somme contre les gentils: Introduction (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1993), passim, esp. 19–30. Here I take a position very different from John Tolan’s in his article about Aquinas in CMR 4, 521–29.
clear a few paragraphs earlier (1.2) that his audience in writing the *Summa contra gentiles* was to be learned sages (*sapientes*), he pointedly asserts in the same short passage that Islam contained none: *non aliqui sapientes, in rebus divinis et humanis excercitati, a principio crediderunt: sed homines bestiales in desertis morantes, omnis doctrinae divinae prorsus ignari.*

Moreover, though Aquinas suggests that he had read the Qurʾan, which circulated in Latin within his own order, there is absolutely nothing in this work to suggest that he had actually done so. Indeed, Aquinas hardly thought at all about the religion that Muhammad preached. The fact that he was comfortable repeating overused Latin-Christian insults against Islam, as well as polemical arguments that he must have known were feeble, suggests that, as Gauthier put it, the problem of Islam “did not interest him at all.” What Aquinas held up for careful, exacting criticism in the *Summa contra gentiles* was not “the errors of Muslim theologians . . . [but] their philosophy.”

It is true that Aquinas engaged with Islam in one other work, the brief *De rationibus fidei*, which consists of the great Dominican's responses to questions sent to him by a contemporary confere living in the Crusader States and known only as the ‘Cantor of Antioch.’ As Gabriel Said Reynolds has made clear, the questions that the cantor sent Aquinas are themselves precisely the sort of questions that real Muslims in the Middle East asked Christians. But since one of the key sources for *De rationibus fidei* is none other than the *Summa contra gentiles*, we will not be surprised to find that Aquinas answers these legitimate Muslim questions with ideas developed largely in response to Arab-Aristotelian philosophy, rather than Islamic beliefs. Furthermore, it is striking that later readers did not see this work as a treatise actually meant to convert

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8 Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, t. 13: *Summa contra gentiles* 1.6 (Romae: Ex typographia polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1882), 17.


Muslims: none of the seventy-seven extant manuscripts (with the exception of one: Oviedo, Biblioteca del Cabildo, MS 24) are grouped together with any of the polemical and apologetic works of Ramon Martí, William of Tripoli, or Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, the three Dominican specialists in Arabic and the study of Islam whose works truly interrogated Islam and its holy book.13

What is true for Aquinas is true, I suggest, of scholastic philosophers and theologians in general in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. While there are plenty of signs that Islam was on the minds of Latin Christians—the Qur’an, for example, circulated widely in two different Latin translations that were both read closely, as the frequent annotations in their margins suggest14—we nevertheless have little evidence of the leading schoolmen bothering with it. We can think of a variety of possible reasons for this: the university curriculum had no place for the investigation of Islam; unlike Jews, Muslims lived outside of Latin Christendom, Spain aside, and certainly far from the centers of the scholastic movement in France, Germany, and England; and unlike Judaism, Islam did not figure in the Bible, so there was no permanent exegetical need to think about it. For whatever reasons—whether some combination of the above or others—scholastic philosophers and theologians were remarkably uninterested in Islam. Other than those marginal figures like Raymond Lull, those in the Latin world who wrote about Islam in this period were overwhelmingly travelers and historians.15

It is striking in this connection to note that things were quite different in the Islamic world, where Christianity was often a central concern of precisely those scholars endowed with ‘magnificence of learning.’ The prodigious poet, jurist, and philosopher Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba (d. 1064), “one of the greatest thinkers of Arabo-Muslim civilization,” as the Encyclopaedia of Islam puts it, famously and relentlessly exposed the contradictions that he found in the Judeo-Christian scriptures in his exhaustive work on the great variety of Islamic sects and other religions with which he was acquainted.16 For example, in Matthew 10, he argues, we find Jesus saying that he did not come bringing peace, but the sword

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14 See Burman, Reading the Qur’an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560, passim.

15 See, for example, CMR 4, 295–306 (Jacques de Vitry), 373–80 (William of Rubruck), and 718–23 (Jean de Joinville).


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of division, while in John 12 Jesus says that he has arrived not to judge and punish, but to save humankind. This and other obvious contrarieties, Ibn Ḥazm concludes, cannot be ascribed to Jesus but “to the four iniquitous men who wrote these corrupted, altered gospels.” This eleventh-century attack on the Christian gospels runs to some eighty pages, but it pales in comparison with the book-length refutations of Christianity that Arab-Muslim scholars wrote in the age of Aquinas. For example, another Andalusī scholar known usually as the Imām al-Qurṭubī, who died in the generation before Aquinas, responded to two short, Mozarabic works in defense of Christianity with a treatise, just under five hundred pages long in a modern edition, called Information about the Corruption and Delusions of the Religion of the Christians.

Another brief Arab-Christian treatise of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, Bishop Paul of Antioch’s Letter to a Muslim Friend, together with a slightly later reworking of it, collectively provoked no less than three sustained attacks on Christianity, written between the mid-twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The last of these, The Correct Answer to those who have Changed the Religion of Christ, weighs in at more than a thousand pages in an edition from the mid-1960s, and more than two thousand in a critical edition from three decades later. Its author, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), moreover, was a combative and profoundly influential scholar who came to be known as the Shaykh of Islam, and was as significant an intellectual in his lifetime and thereafter as Aquinas was to Christendom. Indeed, the editors of a recent collection of essays on him note: “Today, few figures from the medieval Islamic

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19 See CMR 4, 78–82, 583–87, 769–72.

period can claim such a hold on modern Islamic discourses.” Moreover, the Correct Answer is only the longest of a number of different works that Ibn Taymiyyah wrote on Christianity. Even al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), ‘the Proof of Islam,’ whose works have shaped Islamic belief and thought more than anyone else’s, felt obliged to read the Gospels carefully and write a lengthy treatise entitled The Fitting Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus through what is Evident in the Gospel.

Furthermore, it stands to reason that Christianity was of greater concern to Muslim thinkers of ‘magnificent learning’ than Islam was to Latin-Christian intellectuals. Just as Christian scholars could never simply ignore Judaism because their Bible was peopled with Jews and, for the most part, written by them, Muslim scholars similarly could never pretend that Christianity was irrelevant because the Qur’an spoke so frequently about them—often negatively, but sometimes quite positively—and the Sharia required that Christians be protected within the House of Islam. As a result, there were long discussions in medieval Qur’anic commentaries, for example, about which particular Christian groups the Qur’an spoke about in the many different verses that mentioned them. Moreover, Christians were still a massive proportion of the population of most Islamic regimes throughout the pre-modern period. Christianity was, therefore, impossible for Muslim scholars to ignore. In later medieval northern Europe, on the other hand, Latin-Christian thinkers could still manage to behave as if Islamic religious belief hardly existed—or at least, hardly mattered. Those who read the Qur’an closely and wrote with real knowledge about Islam were overwhelmingly not the influential scholars of their age (or any age, for that matter), and what they wrote is of quite modest dimension—dozens of pages at best, not multiple hundreds.

Whether or not the Turkish conquest of Constantinople was the only reason for the remarkable change in the second half of the fifteenth century, it certainly marks it emphatically. Suddenly we find intellectuals such as Aeneus

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22 See CMR 4, 824–78.
23 See CMR 3 [Maha El Kaisy-Friemuth, “Al-Ghazālī,” in Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History, General Editor David Thomas (Leiden: Brill Online, 2013). Reference. University of Tennessee. Accessed 28 May, 2013, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/christian-muslim-relations/al-ghazali-COM_24677]. While doubts have been expressed about the attribution of this work to al-Ghazālī, recent scholarship tends to trust it and to insist that if it is not his work, then it is the work of someone in his circle.
Silvius Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II) and Juan de Segovia writing extensive treatises against Islam. Most notably, however, we find Cardinal Cusanus compiling his massive *Cribratio Alkorani*, in which he painstakingly sifted through the same Latin Qur’an (Robert of Ketton’s mid-twelfth-century version) that Peter the Venerable had offered to send to a disinterested Bernard of Clairvaux three hundred years earlier, and which the leading lights of Latin-Christian thought had ignored for so long. Leaving aside Raymond Lull’s massive and *sui generis* oeuvre on Islam, the *Cribratio* is really the first Latin-Christian work of a scale similar to Imām al-Qurṭubī’s *Information about the Corruption and Delusions of the Religion of the Christians* or Ibn Taymiyyah’s *The Correct Answer to those who have Changed the Religion of Christ*, and it is certainly the first work by a northern European of great significance to Latin-Christian thought that responds to Islam at real length. What I think is certain is that the *Cribratio* has a far greater claim to fulfilling Peter the Venerable’s centuries-old request than anything that came before it.

That this is so tells us a great deal about the place of Islam in the intellectual culture of the high Middle Ages, where it was a pressing concern to many in this period, but not to the leading lights of scholastic thought. Moreover, it illustrates the central importance of Cardinal Cusanus in the broader history of European reflection on Islam. Hence, the essays in this volume will probe the many dimensions of Cusanus’ engagement with the religion of the prophet, as well as explore its connections with broader intellectual trends in Europe. Collectively, they will assist enormously in resolving the puzzle of Peter the Venerable’s three-hundred-year wait.


26 Ludwig Hagemann, ed., *Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae litterarum heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita*, vol 8: *Cribratio alkorani* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1932–).