PART 2

Historical Perspectives

Deficient Sacraments or Unifying Rites?

Alan of Lille, Nicholas of Cusa, and Riccoldo da Montecroce on Muslim and Jewish Praxis

Rita George-Tvrtković

Baptismal washings occur among both Hebrews and Arabs; [accordingly,] it will not be difficult for them to accept for their profession of faith the washing instituted by Christ. They will quite readily consent to their children being baptized.¹

Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) was not the only medieval Christian to mention quasi-baptismal washings such as Muslim *wudu* and Jewish *mikveh* in his discussion of non-Christian religions. In fact, most medieval theologians concentrated their critique of ‘infidel’ rites on the same few practices: ablution, circumcision, abstinence from pork or wine, polygyny, and the literal interpretation of scripture. However, Nicholas’s perspective here is unique. His glib suggestion—that *wudu* and *mikveh* are so similar to Christian baptism that Muslims and Jews would ‘quite readily’ accept it—is striking for its optimism (and naiveté). Furthermore, Nicholas’s relatively positive view can be contrasted with the more commonly held negative views of theologians like Alan of Lille (d. 1202/3), who condemned *wudu* as a deficient sacrament, and Islam itself as a ‘monstrous sect.’

Alan and Nicholas might seem to have divergent views of Muslim and Jewish praxis, but they are actually more similar than they first appear. Alan understood non-Christian rites in a pessimistic way, seeing only their ability to divide. Nicholas, on the other hand, understood non-Christian rites in an optimistic way, seeing only their ability to unify. But in both cases, the theologian was unable to appreciate or even articulate the particularities of these

1 Nicholas of Cusa, *De pace fidei* in *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, trans. Jasper Hopkins, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 1994), 67. Critical Latin text of *De pace fidei* can be found in Raymond Klibansky and Hildebrand Bascour, eds., *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 7 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959); here, XVII.61. All citations of *De pace* in this essay will refer both to the Latin edition (chapter and paragraph number), and to Hopkins’s English translation (page number).

non-Christian practices, and instead simply dismissed them—either negatively like Alan (who deemed the rites deficient) or positively like Nicholas (who believed the rites could be easily transformed). Luckily, the reductionism of Nicholas and Alan does not exhaust medieval perspectives on non-Christian rites. A few other theologians, including the Dominican Riccoldo da Montecroce (d. 1320), offer a more nuanced but also more ambivalent approach. In Riccoldo's case, this complexity is no doubt partly due to the fact that he lived in Baghdad for over a decade and witnessed Muslim praxis firsthand, unlike Nicholas and Alan who never set foot outside Christendom, as far as we know. Among these three authors, Riccoldo alone takes non-Christian rites seriously, at least in the case of Islam, for he describes Muslim praxis in great detail and with relative accuracy. In a few places he even praises Muslim praxis; this is also true for his descriptions of Eastern Christian and Tartar (Mongol) rites, which he also claims to have observed during his Middle Eastern travels. Interestingly, Riccoldo's descriptions of Muslim rites stand in marked contrast to his discussion of Jewish rites, which out of all the religions he discusses in his books is the least detailed and nuanced.

Alan, Riccoldo, and Nicholas were born in different centuries, came from distinct cultural contexts, and had varying levels of familiarity with non-Christian practices and doctrines. In light of these differences, this article will spotlight what each wrote about both Muslim and Jewish praxis, with an eye to 1) differences in the way the same author treated Muslim versus Jewish praxis, and 2) differences among the three authors in their overall approach to other religions. The three theologians are similar in that they all place their discussion of Muslim and Jewish praxis within an overall hierarchy of religions, stressing relationships among them and providing an implicit Christian theology of religions. Nevertheless, they differ in their conclusions, thus offering us a glimpse at the wide range of medieval Christian views on Muslim and Jewish praxis: from deficient sacraments (Alan), to unifying rites (Nicholas), to practices sometimes even worthy of praise (Riccoldo).

Hierarchy of Religions

Before turning to an analysis of the texts, a brief word must be said about their structure. Alan of Lille's *Quadripartita editio* (c. 1185), also known as *De fide catholica contra haereticos, Valdenses, Iudaeos, et paganos*, is an apologetic handbook meant to help preachers combat various threats to orthodoxy.² Its

2 The Latin text of *De fide* can be found in Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, ed., *Alain de Lille: Textes inédits* (Paris: Vrin, 1965), as well as in PL 210: 305–430. See also Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny's

four parts are organized hierarchically: the first two books treat the groups closest to the Roman Church, the heretical Cathars and Waldensians, respectively; the third book treats Jews; and the last book treats pagans, by which Alan means Muslims (he also calls them Saracens and Mahometans, though interestingly he does not call them heretics, as Peter the Venerable and others did before him).³ Riccoldo arranges the sections of his missionary handbook, *Ad nationes orientales* (c. 1300), in roughly the same order as Alan: his first chapter discusses what he calls the heretical Jacobites and Nestorians, his second chapter discusses Jews, and his third chapter discusses Saracens, whom he—unlike Alan—distinguishes from pagans.⁴ The fourth and last chapter discusses Tartars (Mongols).⁵

One can detect this very same hierarchy of religions nearly one hundred and fifty years later in Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* (1453), although the hierarchy is reversed and the order is not strictly followed. *De pace's* dialogue between seventeen different nations begins with the group ostensibly most distant from Christianity, thus: first pagan philosophers discuss wisdom; then an Indian (Hindu) discusses idolatry; then Chaldeans, Jews, and Persians discuss

critical Latin edition and introduction in "Alain de Lille et l'Islam, Le Contra Paganos," *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 18 (1983): 301–350. For more on *De fide* and a general introduction to Alan of Lille, see Gillian Evans, *Alan of Lille: The Frontiers of Theology in the Later Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

- 3 Terms such as 'pagan,' 'gentile,' and 'infidel' retained a certain fluidity throughout the medieval era. See Yves Congar, "'Gentilis' et 'Iudaeus' au moyen âge," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 36 (1969): 222–225. Congar argues that the gentile cannot simply be equated with Jews; he points to Alan of Lille's four categories and to the distinction made by Aquinas and others between gentiles and Jews. (Aquinas lists three kinds of disbelief in ST II.II.10.5–11.) For more on the ambiguous identity of the gentile in Alan of Lille, see Evans, *Alan of Lille*, 128–29. For more on the ambiguous identity of the gentile in Aquinas, see the article by Mark Jordan, "The Protreptic Structure of the *Summa contra Gentiles*," *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 173–209.
- 4 There is no critical Latin edition of Riccoldo's *Ad nationes orientales*, which exists in three medieval MSS, including one in the author's own hand at Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze (MS Conv. Sopp. C. 8. 1173, fols. 21r–244r). Dondaine has published only excerpts in "Ricoldiana: notes sur les œuvres de Riccoldo de Montecroce," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 37 (1967): 119–70. Kurt Villads Jensen formerly posted the entire Latin text online but has since removed it. All English translations in this paper are my own (translated from the Jensen version).
- 5 Interestingly, Riccoldo offers another (reversed) hierarchy in the prologue of *Ad nationes*. Here, he places the Tartars (Mongols) first because he believes religions that are doctrinally the most distant from Latin Christianity are also the easiest to convert, while those who are doctrinally closest, such as the Jacobites, are placed last, because they are most difficult to convert: "Experience shows that the Tartars are easier to convert than the Saracens, the Saracens easier to convert than the Jews, and the Jews easier than the [Eastern] Christians."

the Trinity and Incarnation; and finally, Armenians, English, and Bohemians discuss the sacraments. In general, Nicholas sticks to the hierarchy despite several anomalies,⁶ and the overall movement of the discussion goes from truths obtained by reason (e.g., the existence of truth and the one God), to articles of faith obtained by revelation (e.g., the Trinity and Incarnation), to issues of ritual diversity (e.g., circumcision and the Eucharist).

In short, Alan, Riccoldo, and Nicholas all use the same hierarchy of religions to structure their writings, where the hierarchy is based on each religion's perceived proximity to or distance from the Roman Church. But similar structure does not necessarily generate similar content, for in the end, each theologian reaches a vastly different conclusion about 'infidel' rites.

Alan of Lille: Deficient Sacraments

Alan of Lille (d. 1202/3) was a Cistercian master who taught at Chartres and Paris, but also preached against the Cathars while living in Montpellier. He aimed to provide a comprehensive view of all non-orthodox groups in his book *De fide catholica*, as a way to combat heresy. This goal is not surprising when taking into account when and where Alan was writing; scholars date his text to *circa* 1185, just a year after the Council of Verona's condemnation of the Waldensians, one of the heretical groups targeted by Alan in his book.⁷ Alan's emphasis on Christian errors over Jewish and Muslim ones can be inferred simply by the amount of ink he spilled on each group; the section on Cathars contains seventy-six chapters, while the section on Jews has only twenty-one and the one on pagans (Muslims) has even less at fifteen. In the first section of the work, Alan focuses his discussion on the seven sacraments, which also makes sense given his Cathar target. A discussion of Jewish and Muslim rites, albeit far from comprehensive, is featured in the other sections as well.

Because Alan had spent time in southern France, much of his information on Cathar and Waldensian doctrine and practice was probably obtained firsthand. However, his information on Jews and Judaism most likely was not. There is evidence that he learned about Judaism mainly from Gilbert Crispin's late eleventh-century *Disputatio Iudaei et Christiani*, a text that seems to have been based on a real conversation.⁸ David Berger observes that roughly forty

6 The Tartars (Mongols) are not presented with the Indians as one might think, and the Turks are tossed in with Spanish and German Christians.

7 Evans, *Alan of Lille*, 104.

8 David Berger, "Gilbert Crispin, Alan of Lille, and Jacob ben Reuben: A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Polemic," *Speculum* 49/1 (1974): 34–47.

percent of Alan's chapter on the Jews in *De fide* is copied nearly verbatim from Crispin,⁹ while Jeremy Cohen notes that Alan's writings "contain no evidence of any personal familiarity with rabbinic literature."¹⁰ As for Alan's chapter on Islam, it is unclear whether he had access to the most up-to-date information available in Northern Europe at the time, which would have included either Peter the Venerable's *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* (a primer on Islam written for Christians), or the so-called Toledan Collection (a compendium of Islamic primary texts Peter had had translated into Latin in the mid twelfth century, which included the first Latin translation of the Qur'an by Robert of Ketton).¹¹ If Alan did consult Peter's *Summa* or the Toledan Collection, there is scant evidence of it in *Contra paganos*.¹²

In fact, Alan's short sections on Jewish and Muslim doctrine and practice contain very little originality, except in terms of their organization (some scholars believe it is organized like a handbook for quick reference by preachers).¹³ For example, in his section on Islam, Alan mentions the very same rites that almost every medieval Christian mentions when writing on Islamic practice: *wudu* (ablution), prayer, fasting, almsgiving, the prohibition of wine and pork, and circumcision. From these, the Muslim ritual of *wudu* was especially popular among Christians due to its seeming similarity to baptism.¹⁴ And indeed, two entire chapters of Alan's *Contra paganos* (which contains only fifteen chapters, as noted above) are devoted to *wudu*. Since Alan most likely

9 Berger, "Gilbert Crispin," 34. Berger argues that some of the same passages from Crispin that were copied by Alan were also translated into Hebrew by Jacob ben Reuben in his *Wars of the Lord*; it is possible that both Jacob and Alan consulted a collection of polemical texts circulating in northern France at the end of the twelfth century that included substantial material from Crispin, 37.

10 Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 309.

11 For more on the Toledan collection, see the classic article by Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Deux traductions latines du Coran au Moyen Age," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age* 16 (1948): 69–131. For a more recent treatment, see José Martínez Gázquez, "Translations of the Qur'an and Other Islamic Texts before Dante (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries)," *Dante Studies* 125 (2007): 79–92.

12 d'Alverny, "Alain de Lille et l'Islam," 305.

13 Evans, *Alan of Lille*, 117.

14 One example of the widespread medieval interest in *wudu* can be seen in a manuscript of Riccoldo's *Liber peregrinationis* (MS Vatican Library, Barberini, Lat. 2687, f. 1r–12v), where several later annotators had underlined Riccoldo's entire discussion of *wudu*. For the critical Latin edition of *Liber peregrinationis* (hereafter LP), see René Kappler, ed., *Pérégrinations et Lettres* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997). An English translation of LP can be found in Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012). All page references to LP in this article are to the English translation by George-Tvrtković, unless otherwise noted.

never witnessed an actual Muslim performing this ritual, it is not surprising that he does not describe it in any detail. Rather, he focuses on intentionality, form, and efficacy, with the primary question: is the Muslim '*ablutio corporis per aquam*' sufficient for the remission of sins? Alan concludes—without providing any concrete details about Muslim ablution at all—that *wudu* is insufficient for the remission of sins because it is merely an external washing, with no internal contrition involved.¹⁵ Alan's critique is therefore focused on the superficiality of the external act, which he believes has no interior component. This parallels his critique of Muslim heaven, which he likewise condemns as entirely carnal because he believes that Muslims interpret the Qur'anic description of heaven literally, never allegorically.¹⁶ Alan's focus on the relationship between the internal and external aspects of Muslim rites makes sense given his overall argument against heresy, especially against the Cathars, who argued for the spiritual inefficacy of sacraments, which they deemed purely physical in nature.¹⁷

Moreover, Alan not only criticizes the intentionality or inner reality of Muslim *wudu*, he also criticizes its outward form. In Alan's view, there are at least two problems with the form of *wudu*: it does not invoke the Trinitarian formula, and it can be repeated. Here too, Alan explicitly parallels the repetitive nature of Muslim *wudu* with the kind of rebaptism practiced by some heretics.¹⁸ In short, Alan deems Muslim *wudu* as a deficient baptism in every sense, from its inner reality to its outward form. And if that were not enough, Alan ends his chapters on *wudu* with one last criticism: he accuses Muslims of 'Judaizing,' not only in *wudu* but also in other practices, such as when they abstain from pork or take multiple wives.¹⁹ In Alan's eyes, Jewish and Muslim rituals are equally ineffective and are both forms of idolatry, primarily because they are rooted in an overly literal interpretation of the Law of Moses.²⁰

Alan had meant for his *Contra paganos* on Muslims (Book Four of *De fide*) to be read in tandem with *Contra Iudaeos* (Book Three), since his argument for the Trinity in Book Four consists simply of a short reference to what had already been stated in Book Three.²¹ Likewise, what he writes about Jewish

15 *Contra paganos* (Ch. 9), 342. All page references are to the critical Latin edition of *Contra paganos*, edited by d'Alverny.

16 *Contra paganos* (Ch. 5–6), 338–39.

17 Evans, *Alan of Lille*, 105.

18 *Contra paganos* (Ch. 10), 343.

19 *Contra paganos*, (Ch. 10), 343.

20 *Contra paganos*, (Ch. 10), 343.

21 *Contra paganos*, (Ch. 1), 332: "Ad quos confutandos que contra iudeos de unitate et trinitate diximus dicta sufficiant."

practice in Book Three is connected to what he later says about Muslim practice in Book Four. In both cases, he condemns Jews and Muslims for their literal interpretation of the Law. He thus criticizes the Jewish abstinence from pork as unnecessary in Chapter Eight (this is one of the sections he copied from Gilbert Crispin),²² while in Chapter Ten he connects Jewish rituals to a literal interpretation of the Law, which he calls a kind of 'death' (this section is original to Alan). He argues for the abandonment of all such rituals by citing history, claiming that there have been times in the past when Jews themselves have changed their observance of the Law of Moses. And since now there is no longer any sacrifice, priests, prophets, temple, or places of sacrifice,²³ Alan concludes that Jewish practices such as abstaining from pork can likewise also be abandoned, as Christians already know.

Nicholas of Cusa: Unifying Rites

We will now jump ahead two centuries to Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei*, a short tract written explicitly as a response to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. *De pace* is presented as a heavenly 'dialogue' between the members of seventeen different religious groups, including Jews and Muslims. It is important to note that Nicholas studied Islam and the Qur'an later in life (his 'sifting' of the Qur'an, *Cribratio Alkorani*, appeared in 1461), but his knowledge of Judaism in 1453 remains unclear. He never wrote a text devoted entirely to Judaism, and only refers to the religion in passing in just a few places, including: two sermons on God's name, legislation regarding Jewish dress in the German diocese of Minden, and a few short passages in *De pace*.²⁴

The goal in writing *De pace*, says Nicholas, is to prevent global religious violence by convincing all religions to agree that there is only "one religion in a variety of rites."²⁵ To reach such an agreement, however, the dialogue partners must first grapple with their diverse doctrines and practices. With respect to praxis, Christian sacraments are discussed alongside non-Christian practices

22 Berger, "Gilbert Crispin," 34.

23 *Contra Iudaeos*, Chapter 10, PL 201:410.

24 Thomas Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Jews," in *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Inigo Bocken (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 119–130. Sections of *De pace* that mention Judaism: IX.25–26; XII.41; XIII.42, 44; XV.53; XVI.54–55, 59; XVII.62. (Hopkins's corresponding page numbers: 46–47, 55–56, 62–63, 65, 67.)

25 *De pace* I.6 (Hopkins, 35): "Non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate." For more on this phrase (about which scholars have debated for years), see the essay by Wilhelmus Valkenberg in this volume.

such as circumcision and the 'baptismal washings,' as mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this essay. Like Alan, Nicholas sees parallels between Muslim *wudu* and Christian baptism, though Nicholas also adds Jewish washings to the mix. However, unlike Alan, who deems *wudu* unsatisfactory, Nicholas instead suggests that Jewish and Muslim 'washings' are similar to baptism.²⁶ For Nicholas, the mere presence of baptism-like ablutions among Jews and Muslims is yet another proof that the 'same one religion' underlies different rites:

For baptism is nothing other than a confession of that faith [in Christ] by means of a sacramental sign . . . Baptismal washings occur among both Hebrews and Arabs; [accordingly,] it will not be difficult for them to accept for their profession of faith the washing instituted by Christ.²⁷

What is more, Nicholas believes that the rite of baptism could even be used to unify the members of various religions. This belief is evident in the following amazing assertion:

[Hebrews and Arabs] will quite readily consent to their children being baptized. Since for religious reasons they have allowed males to be circumcised on the eighth day, then the transformation of circumcision to baptism will be acceptable to them, and a choice will be given to them as to whether or not they wish to be content with baptism alone.²⁸

Of course, Nicholas thought that the rite of baptism would unify the various religions because he believed that baptism is rooted in a single faith, and that single faith, furthermore, 'presupposes Christ' (a point he repeats numerous times throughout *De pace*).

In some ways Nicholas's approach to non-Christian rites is the exact opposite of Alan's, but in other ways, it is indeed quite similar. While Alan is too quick to reject Muslim and Jewish rituals as deficient sacraments, thus proving that these religions are not *de fide catholica*, Nicholas seems too quick to accept the rites as a means to interreligious unity. In several places throughout *De pace*, Nicholas states how easy it will be to get a certain group to agree to a modification of practice. Two examples will suffice. First, as noted above, Nicholas

²⁶ *De pace*, XVII.61 (Hopkins, 67).

²⁷ *De pace*, XVII.61–62 (Hopkins, 67).

²⁸ *De pace*, XVII.62 (Hopkins, 67).

asserts that “washings occur for religious devotion among the Hebrews and Arabs” therefore “*it will not be difficult* for them to accept the washing instituted by Christ” and “they will *quite readily* consent to their children being baptized.”²⁹ Second, and even more interestingly, Nicholas seems to be open not only to a modification of Jewish or Muslim practice (how generous of him!), but at one point even expresses a willingness to modify *Christian* practice. He supports this by noting the presence of ritual diversity between Eastern and Western Christians, acknowledging the fact that ‘Ethiopian Jacobites’ (Ethiopian Orthodox Christians) even practice circumcision.³⁰ He then goes on to make a surprising suggestion (given traditional Christian concerns about Judaizing), proposing that all Christians should be willing to get circumcised, if such a concession would preserve peace among the religions: “Indeed, if for the sake of peace the majority were to conform itself to the minority and to receive circumcision, then I would deem that this should be done, in order that in this way peace might be established.”³¹ It seems that for Nicholas, at least in *De pace fidei*, peace among the nations is at least as important as doctrinal orthodoxy, and certainly more important than ritual agreement.³²

Riccoldo da Montecroce: Ambivalence

Riccoldo da Montecroce (d. 1320) was a Florentine Dominican who lived for over ten years in Baghdad, where he studied Islam and Arabic with Muslim masters in their schools, mosques, and homes. Riccoldo's writings on other religions—which include not only the missionary handbook *Ad nationes orientales*, but also his *Liber peregrinationis*, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, and *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem*—are replete with descriptions of

29 *De pace*, XVII.61 (Hopkins, 67). Emphasis mine.

30 *De pace*, XVI.60 (Hopkins, 66).

31 *De pace*, XVI.60 (Hopkins, 66). When writing this section, Nicholas surely had in mind the discussions about circumcision that took place between Latin and Coptic Christians at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438). While the Council eventually came down on the side of non-accommodation, this section of *De pace* suggests that Nicholas disagreed with the Council's decision. I am grateful to Dr. Walter Andreas Euler for bringing this point to my attention at the American Cusanus Society conference at Gettysburg in October 2012.

32 Nicholas's involvement in efforts to reunite Eastern and Western Christians must not be forgotten. In the fall of 1437, he even visited Constantinople as part of a papal delegation to the Greeks—all in preparation for the so-called ‘reunification council’ at Ferrara-Florence the following year. Like Alan, Nicholas's opinions about the rites and doctrines of other Christians and non-Christian religions are connected.

his personal experiences of Muslims (as well as of Eastern Christians and Tartars).³³ Of all the religions he describes, he says the least about Judaism, even though he does write a lengthy section about it in *Ad nationes*, and elsewhere mentions that he witnessed a debate in a synagogue between Dominicans and the large community of Jews in Mosul, Iraq.³⁴ While Riccoldo boasts repeatedly about his knowledge of Arabic (including several Arabic terms and even adding a few words in Arabic script in one manuscript), his knowledge of Hebrew is unknown but probably nil, as there is no evidence for it in his writings.³⁵

Riccoldo writes a great deal about Muslim praxis; in fact, it could be proposed that he writes more about it than any other medieval Christian author.³⁶ In *Liber peregrinationis*, he devotes an entire section to the description and praise of seven Muslim practices that he calls ‘works of perfection,’ which consist of: prayer, almsgiving, devotion to study, respect for God’s name, strictness of morals, hospitality to strangers, and fraternal love.³⁷ Three aspects of Riccoldo’s discussion of Muslim praxis are noteworthy. First, he describes Muslim practices mentioned by no other medieval Christian (such as their reverence for the name of God). Second, some of these details could not have

33 For the critical Latin edition of *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem* (hereafter *Epistolae*), see Reinhold Röhrich, “Lettres de R. de Monte-Cruce,” *Archives de l’Orient Latin* 2 (1884): 258–269. The English translation of *Epistolae*, to which I will be referring in this essay, can be found in George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*. For the critical Latin edition of *Contra legem Sarracenorum* (hereafter *Contra legem*) see Jean-Marie Mérieux, “L’ouvrage d’un frère prêcheur en Orient à la fin du XIII^e s., suivi de l’édition du *Contra legem Sarracenorum*,” *Memorie Domenicane* XVII (1986): 1–142.

34 LP, 200.

35 George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 24–25.

36 William of Tripoli is a close second, both in terms of accuracy of description and substantive commentary. See Peter Engels, ed. and trans., *Wilhelm von Tripolis: Notitia de Machometo* (Würzburg: Echter, 1992), especially 256–57. Yet, Riccoldo still writes more pages and a more sustained commentary on Islamic praxis than William. For more on William of Tripoli, see Thomas O’Meara, “The Theology and Times of William of Tripoli: A Different View of Islam,” *Theological Studies*, 69 (2008): 80–98. Petrus Alfonsi also writes on Muslim praxis throughout the fifth part of *Dialogi*, but his descriptions are short and perfunctory, with little commentary.

37 It is interesting that Riccoldo omits fasting from this list, for almost all other Christians, whether medieval or modern, are quick to acknowledge the triumvirate of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Petrus Alfonsi lists all five pillars of Islam, including prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Roger Bacon and Ramon Martí also mention all three. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are the only Muslim practices specifically mentioned in the 1965 Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate*.

been gleaned simply from reading Islamic literature (for example, the looks on the faces of Muslims while praying), and instead, they seem to be the result of his personal observation of actual praxis. And thirdly, Riccoldo not only describes Islamic praxis, but he actually *praises* it, and his praise is explicit and sustained. Riccoldo's praise is such that not only does he claim that Muslims are equal to Christians in some of their practices (e.g., hospitality), but furthermore, he maintains that Muslims even *surpass* Christians in some cases (e.g., forgiveness). No other medieval theologian is as complimentary about Muslim praxis as Riccoldo.³⁸

Of the seven works of perfection, there are five works that I have never seen mentioned by any other medieval Christian that I know of. They are: devotion to study, hospitality, reverence for the name of God, mutual concord among Muslims, and solemn demeanor. Here I will briefly describe two of them: devotion to prayer and reverence for the name of God.

Devotio in oratio

Riccoldo begins this section by admitting to his readers that Muslim devotion to prayer is so great that it 'stupefied' (*obstupuimus*) him.³⁹ He had already expressed the same sentiment earlier, when describing his surprise at the very existence of the seven works of perfection among the Saracens. In this section, he says that his amazement is the result of his experience (*per experientiam*) seeing Muslims pray daily. Furthermore, this firsthand experience enables him to describe the various types of comportment he has seen among Muslims in prayer: some swoon or their faces drain of all color, while others dance, change their voice, or shake their heads. Some seem to be in ecstasy, while others appear possessed by demons.⁴⁰

The remainder of Riccoldo's discussion of prayer (which amounts to half of the section) is devoted to *wudu*. He lists which body parts are washed, and in what order: first private parts, then hands, then face, and lastly the soles of

38 William of Tripoli includes a long description of prayer in the mosque, but his account includes only several short compliments interspersed throughout, not sustained praise. See his *Notitia*, especially 256–58.

39 LP, 212. For an expanded discussion of the works of perfection, see George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim*.

40 LP, 212. Riccoldo seems to be describing Sufi prayer practices here, rather than the highly ritualized daily *salat*. This is different than other medieval Christians who mention Muslim prayer such as Petrus Alfonsi, who merely note that Muslims pray five times a day, or that prayer is preceded by ablutions (both facts can be found in the Qur'an).

the feet.⁴¹ Riccoldo notes that this practice is “observed by all the sects” and then offers specific details about Hanafi *wudu*, which he claims is “reputed to be more perfect than the others.”⁴² As proof of Hanafi fastidiousness, Riccoldo reports that if they touch a cat, dog, or donkey, they must bathe in at least fifteen hundred buckets of water (for this reason they usually wash in a river). They are so scrupulous, claims Riccoldo, that even after bathing in a river, they place a finger in the anus and smell it to confirm their cleanliness.⁴³

Riccoldo’s emphasis on Muslim comportment during prayer, as well as on the ablution which precedes it, indicates his focus on the physical aspects of Muslim prayer. Riccoldo does not tell us what Muslims say when they pray, nor does he venture into intentionality.⁴⁴ So even though Riccoldo includes unique details regarding Sufi prayer postures and the particularities of Hanafi *wudu*, in the end his description of Muslim prayer is nearly as superficial as that of Petrus Alfonsi, who also lists all the body parts washed during *wudu*. However, Riccoldo’s description of prayer still remains significant due to its overall complimentary tone. Unlike Alan of Lille, who considers *wudu* a deficient form of baptism, Riccoldo regards it as a key part of Muslim prayer, which he calls a ‘work of perfection.’

Reuerentia ad nomen Dei

As proof of the great reverence Muslims have for the name of God, Riccoldo begins by describing their practice of saying or writing the *basmala*—before beginning any letter, speech, trip, or other important act—in order to demonstrate that all is done in God’s name.⁴⁵ Riccoldo’s description of the *basmala* is accurate and sympathetic:

41 LP, 212.

42 The Hanafi, along with the Shafii, Hanbali, and Maliki, comprise the four traditional Muslim schools of jurisprudence.

43 LP, 212.

44 Only William of Tripoli speculates about Muslim intentionality: “In so doing [praying], amazingly, I think, they please God and men, if they have true faith,” *Notitia*, 258. Evidently, William is as amazed as Riccoldo at how devoted Muslims are to prayer.

45 *Basmala* is derived from the first word in the phrase, *bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim*, which means, “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.” The *basmala* is the very first line of the Qur’an, and can be found before every Sura of the Qur’an except the ninth. It is the most oft-recited prayer in Islam, said during all five daily prayers and many other times during the day.

They take the greatest care in never doing, saying, or writing anything of importance without first beginning with the name of God. Also in all the letters they send, they first write reverently the name of the Lord and therefore diligently take care to avoid destroying or throwing away any writing. If they find a piece of paper covered with writing, they reverently pick it up and place it up high in the wall, lest the name of the Lord be trampled underfoot.⁴⁶

Riccoldo is highly complimentary here; note that he repeatedly describes Muslims as acting with care, diligence, and reverence. As additional proof of Muslim reverence for God's name, Riccoldo describes another quintessentially Islamic custom: the *salawat*. This is the adding of praises such as 'glorified and exalted is he' after mentioning the name of Allah, or 'peace be upon him' after saying the name of one of the prophets: "When they come across the name of the Lord while reading or speaking, never does anyone say it alone, but they always add a praise like, 'God who is praised,' or something of this nature."⁴⁷

The fact that Riccoldo includes 'reverence for the name of God' in his list of Muslim good works is significant. Unlike the other Muslim practices he mentions (e.g., prayer and almsgiving), which he recognizes and praises in Islam in part because they are Christian works already familiar to him, in this section he highlights a practice that finds no easy counterpart in Christianity. Furthermore, Riccoldo's description of the *basmala* demonstrates a sound understanding of Islamic theology. Thus, when listing the seven Muslim works of perfection, Riccoldo is careful to entitle this particular virtue 'reverence for the *name* of God,' and not merely 'reverence for God,' demonstrating that he knew the *basmala* reflects Islam's particular focus on the name of God itself.⁴⁸

However, Riccoldo's descriptions of Muslim praxis elsewhere are less than complimentary. For example, in another book, Riccoldo ridicules how and why—and even questions whether—Muslims fast.⁴⁹ Elsewhere he criticizes the Qur'an for recommending fasting and almsgiving as means to repent for

46 LP, 213.

47 LP, 213.

48 Cf. Suras 7:180, 17:110, 20:8, 59:24, where some of the names of God are listed. The hadiths elaborate on this concept, and refer to God's 'ninety-nine names.'

49 *Contra legem*, 142.

one's sins, suggesting that this encourages Muslims to sin.⁵⁰ This criticism is especially strange, given that fasting and prayer are similarly important for Christians.

Riccoldo is clearly ambivalent about Muslim praxis. In his *Contra legem* he concedes that the Qur'an "contains works difficult to implement, like circumcision, not drinking wine, avoiding inebriation, fasting, praying, and giving according to one's means."⁵¹ However, he immediately mitigates this concession by adding that it does not really matter what the Qur'an says, since according to his experience, Muslims do not observe it anyway:

Yet that they do not observe [the Qur'an] is obvious; for they drink wine, they get inebriated with weed, they eat illicit things, they do not fast or pray, nor do they give what they can, and many other things which one knows better who tries to converse with them.⁵²

Furthermore, in his *Epistolae* he asserts that Muslims only 'appear' to have good works,⁵³ and after praising the seven works of perfection in his *Liber peregrinationis*, he feels the need to add a disclaimer: "We have narrated the above less to praise Saracens than to shame certain Christians who refuse to do for the law of life what these damned do for the law of death."⁵⁴ Here Riccoldo repeats an idea frequently repeated by other medievals: that while Muslim praxis often puts Christian praxis to shame, nevertheless it is void of efficacy because the underlying doctrine is false.

It is interesting to contrast Riccoldo's view of Islam with his view of Judaism; the former is informed by serious study and a decade of lived experience, while the latter is most decidedly not. Despite the fact that he claims to have witnessed a debate between Dominicans and Jews in the synagogue of Mosul, his section on Judaism does not seem to be informed by any personal experiences of Jews whatsoever, nor any knowledge of Hebrew. Unlike all the other sections of *Ad nationes* on Eastern Christians, Muslims, and Tartars, which

50 *Contra legem*, 115–16: "For [perjury], the feeding of ten poor boys is enough, or the giving away the same number of robes, or the freeing of one slave. However, he who cannot do these things will fast for three days (Qur'an 5:89)."

51 *Contra legem*, 142.

52 *Contra legem*, 141.

53 *Epistolae*, 150–151.

54 LP, 216.

are filled with detailed firsthand descriptions of their rituals,⁵⁵ the section on Judaism alone contains almost nothing at all about Jewish ritual. Riccoldo only mentions circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath in passing, and he does so merely to say that there were times in history that Jews themselves did not practice these rituals (e.g., during the time of Maccabees).⁵⁶

Unlike his unique account of Muslim praxis, Riccoldo's conclusions about Judaism are standard: Jews read the Old Law literally, they are blind for not accepting Christ as messiah, they crucified Christ knowingly, and their captivity is punishment for deicide. Riccoldo bases his argument largely on Augustine (some scholars claim that he is unique in preserving the 'Augustinian Witness' argument so late into the early fourteenth century),⁵⁷ and copies much of his anti-Jewish polemic from Ramon Martí's *Capistrum Iudaeorum*. Nevertheless, despite Riccoldo's reliance on Martí, he differs in tone, as Riccoldo is much more irenic. He refers to the Talmud only twice but does not condemn it,⁵⁸ and also refers to Jewish 'captivity'⁵⁹ rather sympathetically, possibly because he describes his own time in Baghdad as a kind of 'captivity.'⁶⁰

While Riccoldo frequently underscores his proficiency in Arabic and his personal experience of Muslims, he never claims to have studied Hebrew or to have had any extended contact with Jews. The disparity between his unremarkable, unoriginal account of Judaism and his exceptional and unique account of Islamic praxis may perhaps be explained by the disparity between his intellectual and personal experience—or lack thereof—of the two religious communities.

55 For example, in *Ad nationes*, section 103, Riccoldo discusses ritual diversity in Eastern Christianity by mentioning differences in Lenten fasting, communion recipients, the ingredients of communion bread including leaven, the kinds of chalices used, etc.

56 *Ad nationes*, sections 118–121.

57 Lydia Walker, "A Fourteenth Century Augustinian Approach to the Jews in Riccoldo da Monte Croce's *Ad nationes orientales*," *Comparative Religion Publications* (2011): Paper Three, 38.

58 Walker, "A Fourteenth Century Augustinian Approach," 40.

59 Walker, "A Fourteenth Century Augustinian Approach," 39.

60 He begins his letters after the fall of Acre with this line (*Epistolae*, 137–38): "And so it came to pass that I was in Baghdad 'among captives on the banks of the Chebar' [Ez 1.1], the Tigris. A part of me delighted in the charm of the verdant place in which I found myself . . . But the other part of me was urged to sadness over the slaughter and servitude of the Christian people and their degradation after the lamentable loss of Acre."

Conclusion

Scholars have suggested that Christian arguments against Jews and Muslims have been increasingly connected, beginning in the twelfth century.⁶¹ Ryan Szpiech highlights how Islam was used in the construction of anti-Jewish arguments and suggests that, “like the imaginary Judaism of early anti-Jewish polemic, the idea of Islam took on, on limited occasions, a purely symbolic, hermeneutical role for Christian polemicists as witness to Christian truth.”⁶²

While that may indeed be the case for some medieval authors, it is not so for Alan, Nicholas, or Riccoldo. Perhaps this is partly because the primary goal for *none* of them is to refute Judaism. Rather, they all have much broader aims. And this brings us back to the hierarchy of religions, utilized by all three of our authors. Within that hierarchy, Alan and Nicholas continuously see *connections* between the various religions and their rites. For Alan, Muslim *wudu* is clearly connected to other Muslim practices such as circumcision and polygyny, all of which he considers to be equally ‘Judaizing.’ Furthermore, he believes that Muslim *wudu* is likewise connected to heretical Christian forms of baptism. For Nicholas, who plays down the differences between Muslim *wudu* and Jewish *mikveh*, these ablutions (along with circumcision) are an opportunity to unite Christians, Jews, and Muslims, no matter how doctrinally problematic such a union might be. Unlike Alan and Nicholas, however, Riccoldo makes no explicit connections at all between the few Jewish rites he discusses (circumcision and Sabbath observance) and Muslim rites, to which he devotes a great deal of space. Of these three authors, only Riccoldo disconnects Muslim rites from the hierarchy of religions—if only for a while—by treating them separately and on their own terms. Of course, elsewhere he uses Muslim praxis to admonish Christians against their failures. Nevertheless, he begins with an accurate description of Muslim praxis as such.

Although Alan and Nicholas are furthest away from one another chronologically, it can be said that their views of Muslim and Jewish praxis are more similar to each other’s than to Riccoldo’s. Neither Alan nor Nicholas seems able to appreciate non-Christian rites on their own terms. Why? One reason might be that both Alan and Nicholas were unfamiliar with the lived reality of

61 Ryan Szpiech, “Hermeneutical Muslims? Islam as Witness in Christian Anti-Judaism,” unpublished paper, and Jeremy Cohen, “The Muslim Connection; or, On the Changing Role of the Jew in High Medieval Theology,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 141–63.

62 Szpiech, “Hermeneutical Muslims,” 6.

the religions they describe. We have no evidence that Alan read Jewish texts on his own (after all, he copied nearly forty percent of his book on the Jews from Gilbert Crispin). And while he might have known Jews personally, given his northern French context, he does not draw on that experience in *De fide*. Furthermore, as far as we can tell, Alan does not use the most up-to-date information about Islam. Nicholas, similarly, had little if any personal experience of Jews or Muslims, and also had little knowledge of their texts at the time he wrote *De pace*.⁶³

Riccoldo is different, at least in regard to Islam. He lived among Muslims for a decade and studied their literature in its original language. His Arabic was so advanced that not only does he brag about it repeatedly in his work, but he actually uses it to write marginal comments on an extant manuscript of an Arabic Qur'an.⁶⁴ In stark contrast, Riccoldo's knowledge of Judaism is very limited; we can see this in his over-reliance on Ramon Martí, Petrus Alfonsi, and Augustine. Riccoldo's writings on Judaism and Jewish praxis do not demonstrate any knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish texts, or actual Jews. But in his discussion of Muslim praxis, Riccoldo's experience truly shines through. Only someone with extensive personal experience of a lived religion could have the ability to describe Muslim praxis with such detail. In Riccoldo we therefore see an interesting dichotomy: his views of Judaism are more like Alan's (because he copies from others and has no direct experience of Jews), but his views of Islam are unique; after all, his praise of the Muslim 'works of perfection' is so effusive that he feels the need to apologize for it twice!⁶⁵

To conclude, in terms of their overall views of Muslim and Jewish rites, we see significant differences between these three medieval theologians. Lille is pessimistic (their rites are deficient sacraments), Cusa is optimistic (their rites have the potential to unify), and Riccoldo is stupefied, ambivalent, and uneven in his assessment, due to the asymmetry between his knowledge and experience of Judaism and Islam.

63 See Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Jews," 119–130, and James Biechler, "A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia," in *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 185–202.

64 Riccoldo's Arabic knowledge has been confirmed recently by Thomas Burman, who suggests that the Latin marginal glosses in an Arabic Qur'an in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fonds arabe 384) are the friar's. See Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read his Arabic Qur'an," *Dante Studies* 125 (2007): 89–105. For more on these glosses, see also François Déroche and José Martínez Gázquez, "Lire et traduire le Coran au Moyen Âge: les gloses latines du manuscrit arabe 384 de la BNF," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 154 (2010): 1023–42.

65 LP, 211 and 216, respectively.

Even though constructing a Christian theology of religions is primarily an internal task, that is, it requires the theologian to define other religions 'on Christian terms,' it is no less important for the theologian to attempt to understand the other, as much as possible, on that particular religion's *own* terms. This might seem anachronistic, yet all three medieval theologians discussed in this chapter did try to learn about Jewish and Muslim praxis as best they could. Alan remained rather ignorant about the concrete details of Muslim doctrine and practice, but he did try to get information on Judaism by going to a reliable source, namely, Gilbert Crispin. Although Nicholas's curiosity about Islam eventually led him to study the Qur'an in greater depth and consequently critique it, until this later point, his views of Islam (as expressed in *De pace*) were not much better informed than Alan's. Neither of them were able to appreciate or articulate the particularities of Jewish and Muslim practices, and instead set them aside too easily, either because they were thought to be too different from Christian practice (Alan), or similar enough (Nicholas). Therefore, Riccoldo's knowledge of Islam appears the deepest: he studied the Qur'an in Arabic with Muslim masters, attended Muslim schools, and observed Muslim praxis *in situ*. Partly because of this firsthand experience, Riccoldo takes Muslim rites seriously, and sometimes even 'on their own terms.' Of our three authors, he alone describes Muslim praxis in detail and with relative accuracy. And as a result, his assessment of Islam, though still quite negative, is better informed and much more nuanced. Hence, Riccoldo shows us that when constructing a Christian theology of religions, direct experience of the other really does matter.