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# Aspects of the Reception of the Qur'an in Modern Europe

*John Tolan* | ORCID: 0000-0003-2649-2261  
Professeur émérite d'histoire, Université de Nantes  
Membre de l'Academia Europæa  
*john.tolan@univ-nantes.fr*

*Houari Touati*  
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris)  
Institut des Mondes Africains (IMAF, Paris)  
*houari.touati@ehess.fr*

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In recent years, studies of the reception of the Qur'an in modern Europe have multiplied and diversified to form a new field of study, through an approach that remains largely philological, but which is increasingly in tune to historical and cultural issues. Each of these studies bears witness, in its own way, to the role played by humanists in rethinking the relationship between European culture and Islamic culture, through its founding book. The magnificent illuminated manuscript in the Vatican library, produced (probably in Rome) by the Sicilian Jewish humanist Flavius Mithridates (who also went by other names, most prominently Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada) in response to a commission from the Duke of Urbino and Count of Montefeltro Frederick III (trained by the great Quattrocento humanist pedagogue Vittorino da Feltre), bears witness to this change in attitude as early as the mid-15th century.<sup>1</sup> This is a ceremonial manuscript, but it also contains a secular text consisting of a treatise on astronomy and a religious text containing Suras XXI and XXII of the Qur'an. Both texts are structured in two columns, one containing the original Arabic text, the other its Latin translation. The Arabic script used is *naskhī*, the most widespread of the seven calligraphic styles used by professional Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican, BAV, MS urb. lat. 1384. See *Thomas E. Burman, Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

copyists. It combines clarity with beauty, a sign that the copyist – clearly an Eastern Christian – was an excellent calligrapher. Its ductus is punctuated and vowelized, as in the Islamic tradition. This aesthetic and philological enhancement of the Qur'an bears witness to a completely different relationship to that dictated by the apologetic intentions and anti-Muslim polemical stakes at work in Robert of Ketton's "Clunisian edition" conceived in the middle of the 12th century. Not that this intentionality has ceased to influence European culture, which continues to be influenced by the authority of the Church, even within humanist circles, but it is no longer the only one. Under the influence of humanists, some of whom were Arabophiles, the uses of the Qur'an in Europe multiplied. They were driven by two orientations, one hermeneutical, the other philological. In both cases, this required a new translation of the Qur'an, one that better met the new humanist requirements.

Robert Ketton was hired by Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, the richest and most powerful monastery in Europe, to translate the Qur'an into Latin, so that Peter could produce a proper refutation of the "Saracen heresy".<sup>2</sup> Ketton completed his translation in 1143, producing an elegant text in high Ciceronian style, which made it into a holy text more comprehensible and approachable to his readers at the same time as it departed from the style and structure of the Arabic original. He also incorporated passages from *tafsir* into his translation, resulting in a text both more comprehensible than the original and in concordance with standard Muslim exegesis. The strengths and the weaknesses of Robert of Ketton's Latin translation became apparent to scholars who participated in the Council of Basel (1431-37). Several copies of Ketton's translation circulated at the council, some of whose members used arguments from the Qur'an to argue in favor of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, or in favor of the conciliar governance of the Church.<sup>3</sup> A number of churchmen who had met at Basel subsequently engaged with the Qur'an in different ways. Jean Germain, bishop of Châlons and advisor to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, advocated crusade and wrote the first extensive anti-Muslim polemic in French, the *Débat du Chrestien et du Sarrazin* (1451). Dominican Cardinal Juan de Torquemada composed his *Contra principales errores perfidi Machometi* in 1459. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who became Pope Pius II in 1458, wrote a missive to Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, inviting

2 Cándida Ferrero Hernández & John Tolan, eds., *The Latin Qur'an, 1143-1500 Translation, Transition, Interpretation*, The European Qur'an (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021).

3 Jacob Langeloh, *Der Islam auf dem Konzil von Basel (1431-1449): eine Studie mit Editionen und Übersetzungen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Johannes von Ragusa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019).

him to convert to Christianity. While these three continued standard medieval Christian polemical readings of the Qur'an, two other friends who met in Basel took new approaches: Juan de Segovia and Nicholas of Cusa.

The translation of the Qur'an undertaken on the initiative of Juan de Segovia in the mid-15th century was the first to be dictated by the opening up of a new hermeneutical circle in which, if Islam appears to participate in the design of divine Providence, it is less to punish Christians for their sins, as medieval scholastics thought, than to perfect its realization on Earth. So, instead of fighting Muslims and trying to convert them by force, by demonizing them, we need to treat them with benevolence, entering into dialogue with them to convince them through "peace and doctrine" (*pacis et doctrina*). This requires "a true knowledge of what their law says, which is lacking in [Robert of Ketton's] translation", explains Juan de Segovia in his preface to the new translation of the Qur'an he initiated, which presents, in addition to the Arabic text in one column, its translation into Latin and Castilian in the other two columns facing the original.<sup>4</sup> This is the founding act of an approach not unconnected with the questioning of Nicolas de Cues. In his *De pace fidei* (1453), this German theologian and humanist philosopher was one of the first, if not the first, to defend the idea of convergence between monotheistic religious traditions united by a common core, which underpins their respective beliefs, (a convergence later theorized by Emir Abd El-Kader, using the metaphor of the tree with its single trunk and multiple branches), before asking in his *Cribratio Alchorani* (1460/61): How was Islam born and under what circumstances did it develop? What was its relationship with Christianity? Are its criticisms of Christianity worthy of consideration? Is it possible to find in this religion a path of truth that leads to God? As far as Juan de Segovia is concerned, he takes it for granted that one cannot confront such questioning without taking the Qur'an seriously. What had been useful in Ketton's translation for readers unfamiliar with Arabic (paraphrases, material adapted from *tafsir*) was undesirable for those like Juan who took a close, philological interest in the Arabic text. He therefore undertook to translate the sacred book of the Muslims on a new, more rigorous and faithful basis. Between December 1455 and March 1456, Īsā ibn Jābir al-Shaqūbī, *faqīh* of Juan's native city of Segovia, at Juan's request came to the Savoyard monastery of Aiton to work with him. First, Īsā made a copy of the Arabic Qur'an in the left-hand column of the manuscript, punctuated and vowelized it. Then, together Īsā and Juan translated it into Castilian

4 Juan had the manuscript sent to the Salamanca University Library at his death; it has subsequently been lost. See Davide Scotto, *Juan de Segovia and the Qur'an: Converting the Muslims in Fifteenth-Century Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).

(in the second column). Īsā subsequently returned to Spain, and Juan rendered the Spanish translation into Latin, which occupied the third column. This polyglot Qur'an – the first of its kind – has disappeared, but the preface remains, setting out the aim of the editorial project and the approach followed, dictated by the principle that “to those who wish, by peace and doctrine, to obtain the conversion of the Saracens to the sacraments of the Catholic faith, so that divine mercy may grant what could not be obtained by force of arms and by so many long experiments, so that the Saracens may cease to curse the name of Christ, which they blaspheme more and more each day, it seems really very useful and even necessary that they have a true knowledge of what their law says, which is lacking in the above-mentioned translation”, which is Robert of Ketton's. And to do this, we must stop “attributing false accusations to them”. Preaching the conversion of the Saracens “through peace and doctrine”, Juan de Segovia based his approach on a philological foundation, which would restore the Qur'anic text, if not in its fullness, at least in its accuracy, without subtracting anything from it or adding anything to it. Philological and hermeneutical innovation cut a path through the rubble of the old idea of saving Christianity by the bloody eradication of the Saracen heresy, restoring Islam to its authentic Christian origin. Giles of Viterbo, Guillaume Postel and others subsequently followed suit.

Giles of Viterbo, who received his initial training in the school of Marsilio Ficino, under the guidance of its founder, is also at the crossroads of another humanist intellectual tradition, which consisted in wresting the Qur'an from the grip of medieval Christian soteriology, without, however, completely undoing it. He sought to restore it to the secular intellectual vein of the “old theology” (*prisca theologia*), in which the appropriation of the Greco-Roman heritage was to be accompanied by that of the other great ancient cultures, in particular the Jews (Giles of Viterbo learned Hebrew and studied the doctrine of the Kabbalah, as the catalog of his library and his own cabalist writings, the first of their kind in Latin, testify), the Chaldeans (whose Oracles he read in a partial translation by his master Marsilio Ficino), the Egyptians (whose *Corpus hermeticum* he knew in the name of Hermes Trismegistus) or the Arabs (as his writings and the catalog of his library testify, which, in addition to texts related to the Qur'an, lists books on philosophy by Avicenna, Ibn Ṭufayl and Averroes, and on alchemy by Rhazes and Geber).<sup>5</sup> He was dispatched as papal legate to Spain in 1517, and the following year produced a Latin translation of the Qur'an by the Muslim neo-convert to Christianity Juan Gabriel Torres

5 Katarzyna Starczewska, *Latin Translation of the Qur'an (1518-1621): Commissioned by Egidio Da Viterbo: Critical Edition and Case Study* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018).

de Teruel, whose patron commissioned his protégé Leo Africanus to revise it in 1525. In the year 1518 Bellús' Qur'an, with its three interleaved translations, Catalan, Castilian and Latin, was produced in the same kingdom of Aragon, and whose last owner was none other than the close relative of the Italian humanist cardinal Johann Albrecht Widmanstädter. The original manuscript of Gilles de Viterbo's translation has not survived, but it is preserved in two manuscripts: MS Mm. v. 26 (C) from Cambridge, which remains incomplete, and MS D 100 inf from Milan, copied by the Scottish scholar David Colville in 1621 from a manuscript at the Escorial. This manuscript is all the more remarkable for its philological rigor, as it is composed of four columns, the first for the Arabic text, the second for its transliteration into the Latin alphabet, the third for the Latin translation, reworked by Leo Africanus, and the fourth for philological comments and observations.

This philological inflection, already observed in Juan de Segovia, was also at work in the Qur'anic manuscript commissioned by Gilles' master, Marsilio Ficino, and that of Pico della Mirandola, his student and successor at the head of his humanist philosophical school. Bolder than Nicholas of Cusa, who ultimately admitted only one true path leading to God, Pico explored the possibility that there were several through the *prisca theologia* and by integrating Muhammad among its founders, when he maintains in the *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486) that "the Pythagoreans make criminal men out of beasts and, if we believe Empedocles, into plants; In imitation of them, Mahomet liked to repeat that when we move away from divine law, we fall into bestiality" Before adding: "And he was right." But he did not go so far as to recognize the idea of the co-presence of various religious forms united by the same end to be achieved by following different paths defended by Thomas Moore in his *Utopia* (1517). Nevertheless: his curiosity, that of Mithridates, as well as that of Ficino, opened the way to an approach to the Qur'an in which the revealed book of Muslims participated in the eternal wisdom in which theology and philosophy merged in harmony.

Then the Qur'an came to be taken decidedly seriously. This bold path, however, remained narrow, and few humanists took it. However, his philological approach was now established; it intended to restore and uncover the truth found in the Qur'an, even though the idea of its refutation had not disappeared and would not disappear anytime soon. At the same time, the Qur'an began its penetration into European culture through the interest nourished by the school of Marsilio Ficino for Kabbalah, whose influence was felt by Mithridates through his notes and Qur'anic commentaries and, obviously, by Gilles of Viterbo, who was the first to write on Kabbalah in Latin, so that no less than 120 Qur'anic quotations were found – according to Hartmut

Bobzin – in his *Dictionarium sacrae Legis cum expositione latina per ordinem alphabet; Vocabularium distionum chaldaicorum cum expositione latina per ordinem alphabet* (Paris, BnF, Ms. F. lat. 596), before one of his close friends, the German humanist Widmanstädter, used it to more copiously interpret the Qur'an through glosses which are taken up by the Swiss Protestant humanist Bibliander in his edition of the Qur'an of Robert of Ketton in 1543, revised in 1550, before it was translated into Tuscan and experienced a remarkable dissemination throughout European culture, relayed and amplified by other translations into European languages, as Pier Mattia Tommasino showed,<sup>6</sup> after Carlo Ginzburg had attracted the attention to his influence, in his remarkable study of micro-history, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976), about the humble Menocchio, who found inspiration in his reading of the Italian Qur'an. The translation was also appreciated by the elite of the Republic of Letters: Guillaume Postel, Joseph Justus Scaliger, Giacomo Castelvetro, John Selden, Alessandro Tassoni, Leon Modena, Antoine de Laval, Montesquieu and others.

It is against the backdrop of this change in the reception of the Qur'an in humanist Europe that we have brought together the various contributions in this issue of *Studia Islamica*, testifying to the influence that the Qur'an had on modern European culture. The impetus for this volume was a workshop held in Nantes in December 2021 on "European perspectives on the Qur'an (16th-18th C.): polemics and beyond". This workshop was part of an ongoing Synergy program financed by the European Research Council, "The European Qur'an. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1143-1850 (EuQu)".<sup>7</sup> The project looks at the various ways non-Muslim Europeans have engaged with the Qur'an between Robert of Ketton's translation in 1143 and the fundamental new Qur'an scholarship of the early 19th century by scholars such as Abraham Geiger, Gustav Weil and Theodor Nöldeke.

This issue, then, brings together studies on what we might call the "philological turn" in European Christian approaches to the Qur'an from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Not that the polemical bent of previous centuries disappeared, but it became less prominent in the context of other concerns: rivalry between Protestants and Catholics (each of whom often branded their rivals as worse than the Turk), and a concern for the linguistic aspects

6 Pier Mattia Tommasino, *L'Alcorano di Macometto: storia di un libro del Cinquecento europeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013).

7 The project website is <https://euqu.eu/>. For an introduction to the subject see Jan Loop y Naima Afif, eds., *The European Qur'an: Encounters with the Holy Text of Islam from the Ninth to the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).

and textual history of the Qur'an connected with burgeoning scholarship in Hebrew, Biblical studies, and Church history.

Guillaume Postel, as Emilie Picherot shows, though best known for his translations from Hebrew and his theological creativity, was also an Arabist, building up an eclectic Arabic-language library during his two trips to the Ottoman Empire. His relationship with Islam curiously resulted in what some Spanish crypto-Muslims of the same century were putting in place: a de-Islamized Islam, focused on principles common to Muslims and Christians and therefore more likely to be accepted by the majority society. The *Historia verdadera del Rey Don Rodrigo* (1599) by Miguel de Luna, a forger, defector, probably crypto-Muslim and close to the spheres of power, is the most obvious novelistic realization of this. The interest of this de-Islamization lies first in its political use, initially Spanish and community-based for Luna, much more global for Postel, who considers that three quarters of humanity are made up of Muslims. This construct of de-Islamization is based on a true knowledge of the Qur'an and Qur'anic glosses. In Spain, which has many descendants of Muslim converts from the middle ages until their definitive expulsion in 1609, the Qur'anic material and its interpretation represents a major political issue. If it is different for Postel's France, marked by the diplomatic desire for rapprochement with the Sublime Porte initiated by François 1er, access to the Qur'an and its interpretations goes far beyond simple scholarly curiosity. Picherot compares Luna's novel and Postel's relationship to Islam in his *Grammatica arabica* (1540) as in his vast project of *Concord of the world* (1543) or his travel story *The Republic of the Turks* (1560).

Jesús Gómez analyzes a work very different in spirit and objectives than those of Postel and Luna. Onofre Micó, of the Order of the Holy Trinity, reaffirms the classic Catholic understanding of Muhammad as a false prophet and the Qur'an as a spurious scripture. Gómez looks at Micó's *Lex euangelica contra Alcoranum* (1700), in particular a sermon contained in the work, the *sermo in Epiphania Domini*. Here Micó extols the figure of Jesus Christ, commemorating his birth through the study of the episode of the devotion of the Three Wise Men. By contrasting the figures of Jesus Christ and Muhammad, the Valencian author seeks to show that the belief that the founder of Islam was a prophet announced in the Holy Scriptures is unfounded. Through his numerous readings, Onofre Micó composes a testimony that refutes Muhammad, incorporating it into a work that aspired to provide relief from pain and fatigue to the captives of Algiers, and to become a pedagogical tool for the Trinitarians in order that they could achieve the conversion of African Muslims.

Giovanni Maria Martini examines the work of a brilliant and idiosyncratic seventeenth-century intellectual, Athanasius Kircher. In 1653, the second

volume of Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (*Egyptian Oedipus*) was released in Rome. In this work the famous Jesuit scholar inserted a brief treatise entitled *De Cabala Saracenicā* (*The Cabbala of the Saracens*). This text is an analytical study of 'Islamic magic,' allegedly based on a vast selection of original Arabic sources; possibly the first *scientific* and *modern* study ever undertaken on this subject, and therefore a significant work in the history of Orientalism and Islamic studies in Europe. Although *De Cabala Saracenicā* is not a work expressly dedicated to the holy book of Muslims, the Qur'an plays a central role in it, both from the point of view of the author's theoretical exposition of the principles that regulate the 'magic of the Arabs,' and in terms of direct and indirect mentions of Qur'anic verses and divine names cited by Kircher in Arabic characters and in Latin translation in the long pages dedicated to presenting (in order to refute them) the magical techniques contained in the texts he examined.

Ferenc Tóth looks at perceptions of the Qur'an among Hungarian residents in the Ottoman empire in the 17th and 18th centuries. This period was characterized in Central Europe by Hungarian independence movements supported by the Ottoman Porte on the one hand and by French diplomacy on the other. After the failure of these movements, colonies of Hungarian refugees settled in the Ottoman Empire, forming Christian communities protected by the Ottoman authorities and the French embassies in Constantinople. Some of their members converted to Islam and integrated into the Ottoman hierarchy, such as the famous Ibrahim Müteferrika who left us a very interesting text of his conversion; others observed the Muslim world with interest and left testimonies of it, such as Prince Francis II Rákóczi in his writings and correspondence or his secretary Kelemen Mikes (in his popular *Letters from Turkey*). The Hungarian emigrants were surrounded by dragomans, renegades, deserters, agents, and travelers who often played an intermediary role between them and the Ottomans. According to the testimony of the sources, many of them had precise knowledge of the Qur'an from which they drew examples in their works. Some Hungarian emigrants distinguished themselves as agents specialized in Ottoman affairs or became experts on the Ottoman world. They thus established relations between the West and the East.

Finally, Gianenrico Paganini's article examines the portrayal of Muhammad and Islam among early modern philosophical writers who circulated their ideas in clandestine manuscripts. From the late Renaissance philosophers to the Early Enlightenment the image of Islam and Muhammad considerably changed even while the knowledge about them showed little objective improvement. What was decisive was framing the image of Islam in a more general and philosophical history and theory of religions that already were



relatively independent on any theological orthodoxy. In this process, which often had to be developed under the cover of clandestinity, radical philosophical manuscripts much more than printed works played an important role. Paganini in particular looks at the following works: the *Colloquium heptaplo-meres*, attributed to Jean Bodin; the *Theophrastus redivivus* (1659), the first huge treatise that considers history and theory of religions from an atheistic point of view; and the *Traité des trois imposteurs* (1718) that resumes the old theory of legislators as imposters in the new philosophical climate dominated by Spinoza's philosophy.

Together, these articles show the complexity and diversity of the reception of the Qur'an in 16th-18th century Western Europe. Authors like Onofre Micó continued to uphold the traditional Catholic reading of the Muslim holy book as the bogus revelation of a false prophet. Bodin and the anonymous authors of the *Theophrastus redivivus* and the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, on the contrary, used the Qur'an as a tool for challenging the universality of Christianity and creating doubt about the Church, its doctrines, and its ecclesiastical hierarchies. Kircher's approach is different: not directly confronting the legitimacy (or not) of the Qur'anic revelation, he uses it as a tool for understanding "Saracen Cabbala". Postel and the Hungarian émigrés are more ambivalent, retaining a traditional vision of the superiority of Christianity while creating means to accommodate Islam, avoiding its demonization. All of these studies show, each in its own way, how Islam and the Qur'an played interesting and important roles in the development of early modern European thought. They all attest to the importance of the "European Qur'an."

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