A Witness of Their Own Nation: On the Influence of Juan Andrés

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Many have now heard the story of how, on 4 January 2007, the first Muslim to be elected to the United States congress – Democratic representative from Minnesota Keith Ellison – was sworn in, not without some controversy. As is the custom, public servants are allowed, in the non-official presentation for the media leading up to the actual swearing-in ceremony in the House of Representatives itself, to place their hand on the Bible while vowing to do their duty. Since Ellison is a convert to Islam, he asked if he could use the Qurʾān rather than the Bible, and he was allowed to use no less than the personal copy of the Qurʾān in English translation that once belonged to Thomas Jefferson, a copy that, after surviving multiple fires in the Capitol, now resides in the Library of Congress. This use of the Qurʾān caused considerable controversy, spurring conservative author and pundit Dennis Prager to declare in an editorial that ‘America, not Keith Ellison, decides what book a congressman takes his oath on’.1 Although this remark was denounced by the Anti-Defamation League as ‘intolerant, misinformed, and downright un-American’, Prager’s views found some sympathetic ears, and a chain email started circulating at this time alleging that US president Barak Obama had similarly been sworn in to the presidency on a Qurʾān instead of a Bible, and that he was actually a clandestine Muslim.2

While this story and its fallout are now well known, what is not commonly known is that Jefferson’s Qurʾān, a 1764 printing of an English translation made

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by George Sale in 1734, contains references to Christian readers of the Qurʾān that reach far back into the past, even as far as sixteenth-century Iberia. In his prologue, Sale refers directly to one ‘Johannes Andaes, a native of Xativa, in the kingdom of Valencia, who from a Mohammedan doctor became a Christian priest, translated not only the Koran but also its glosses and the seven books of the sonna, [sic] out of Arabic into the Arragonian tongue’.3 This ‘Johannes Andaes’ is none other than Juan Andrés, the name given as the author of the anti-Muslim treatise Confusión o confutación de la secta mahomética y del alcorán (Confusion or Confutation of the Muḥammadan Sect and of the Qurʾān), published in Valencia in 1515. Although we know little about who Juan Andrés was, the fact that George Sale mentions his name and text in the eighteenth century is not an anomaly, for he was cited by a continuous stream of Christian writers about Islam from the sixteenth century all the way to the end of the eighteenth, and even on occasion in the nineteenth and twentieth, not only in Spain but throughout Europe and the United States.

In this essay, I will first explore what little is known about Juan Andrés’ identity. I will then trace out some of the channels of his influence, explaining the model of testimony within a conversion narrative that he made use of, and considering in particular the influence of Juan Andrés’ use of original Arabic texts. By sketching out the reach of his influence in subsequent writing, I will suggest that Juan Andrés, a mysterious, poorly understood figure, served as a unique vector of transmission of medieval polemical writing to the early modern and modern world, and that his representation of the Qurʾān, while not the most accurate or the most exhaustive of Iberian sources, was by far the longest lived and the most influential for centuries after.

In Search of Juan Andrés

We know very little for certain about the life of Juan Andrés, and most of what little we think we know has come from Juan’s prologue to the Confusión, where he states that he was born a Muslim in the city of Xàtiva, near Valencia:

I was born and instructed and taught in the sect of Muḥammad by ‘Abdallāh my biological father, who was a faqīh [religious jurist] for the same city. After his death I succeeded him in his office of faqīh, in which

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