BYZANTIUM, ISLAM, AND THE GREAT WESTERN SCHISM

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In 1398, as the Great Western Schism ravaged the theological landscape of western Christendom, the French author Honoré Bovet (c. 1345–c. 1410), wrote a most intriguing work. In his *L’apparicion maistre Jehan de Meun*, dedicated to Valentina Visconti, the duchess of Orléans, Bonet penned an allegory in which four “outsiders” from French society—a physician, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Jacobin (a Dominican friar)—address an anonymous sleeping prior. In his dream, the prior, a character who represented Bovet, listened to the other characters’ perceptions and criticisms of the present state of affairs of western Christendom.¹ The work, a 14th-century French vernacular combination of prose and rhyming poetry, is both a literary account of the political events that shaped late medieval Europe and a telling criticism of the forces that allowed the situation of the Great Western Schism to continue. The Great Western Schism was a crisis of enormous magnitude in an era characterized by other profound crises. Indeed, Laura Ackerman Smoller has described the crisis of the Schism as being the most salient crisis to afflict late medieval Christendom, and Hélène Millet has demonstrated that some medieval Europeans reckoned it as a truly monstrous event.²

Bovet’s dream allegory, which I discuss further below, illustrates well the central theme of this present chapter: that of the view of the Great Western Schism by those who lived “outside” of western Christendom. Specifically, I discuss the perception of the Schism by individuals

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from the Byzantine and Muslim worlds. Some people in these regions certainly noticed the crisis of the Schism, which wrought considerable effects upon western Christian society, culture, and politics. Most scholars of the Schism understandably have focused their energies on the effects of this rupture upon western Europe, as its events and consequences primarily and profoundly affected that specific region, as discussed by the other authors who have contributed to this present volume. Yet there are telling glimpses in the historical record that evidence the Byzantines’ and Muslims’ perceptions of the Great Western Schism. Therefore, what constituted primarily a western Christian affair nonetheless had significant ramifications both for and within the Byzantine and Muslim domains.

My goal in this present chapter is to discuss briefly the perceptions of the Schism by those individuals supposedly “outside” of western Christendom. I do so by dividing my study into three parts. In the first section, I will discuss the history and historiography surrounding the Byzantines’ reaction to the events of the Schism. For them, the Great Western Schism was a significant event that they saw as having important consequences for their own survival. In the second section, I address the relationship between Islam and the Great Western Schism. Some Christians, such as Honoré Bovet, used Muslim literary characters to offer biting critiques of Christendom. Bovet did so by depicting a strengthening Muslim presence as another schism that had been empowered by existing divisions within Christendom. In Bovet’s specific reckoning, the Islam of the Ottoman Turks was a threat to a society whose inefficiency in rectifying the Great Western Schism made it powerless to confront that threat. In the final, and most substantial, section of this chapter, I investigate the life and prophetic writing of one specific individual, Anselm Turmeda/‘Abdallah al-Taryuman, a Franciscan friar from Majorca who converted to Islam. While a Muslim, Turmeda wrote an astrologically themed prophetic poem criticizing the state of religious and political affairs in the West. The trauma of the Great Western Schism provides the context for Turmeda’s prophecy and the convert referred to it throughout his piece. Turmeda offers an especially intriguing case study, and I spend the bulk of this chapter

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3 For an introduction to the history and historiographies of the Great Western Schism, see Joëlle Rollo-Koster, “Civil Violence and the Initiation of the Schism,” in this volume.