

Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković, and Donald F. Duclow, eds.

Nicholas of Cusa and Islam. Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014. Pp. xx + 256. Hb, 115 Euros.

This book collects the papers of the 2012 conference of the American Cusanus Society and the International Seminar on Pre-Reformation Theology (Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary). As the title indicates, the book highlights the dual nature of medieval Christian-Muslim relationships, in which “polemic and dialogue” coexisted. This volume on the prominent figure of Nicholas of Cusa is extremely relevant in the context of lively current scholarship on Christian-Muslim dialogue, particularly as discussion of the relationship between the two faiths has been fueled by current events.

The book is divided into three sections. The first deals with Nicholas of Cusa’s engagement with Islam in his key works *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*. Part two discusses “Historical Perspectives,” digging into the medieval context in which Cusano lived and describing the approaches to Islam of figures such as Alan of Lille, Riccoldo da Montecroce, Juan de Segovia, and Ramon Llull. Finally, the third part, entitled “Muslim Responses to Christianity,” describes the medieval Muslim perspective on the faith’s relationship with Christianity. Presenting a discussion of the Muslim perspective is a commendable choice—while there are several books discussing the Christian side of the debate, and just as many discussing the Muslim side, it is uncommon to find the two perspectives in the same volume, reproducing in this way a dialogic encounter.

Although the book is focused on the Middle Ages, one of the chapters in the second part provides an intriguing discussion of Ignatius Loyola: Paul Richard Blum’s excellent essay, “How to Deal with Muslims? Raymond Lull and Ignatius Loyola” (160–176). In this chapter, the author compares two accounts of a relationship between a Christian and a Muslim, from the *Vita coetanea* of Ramon Llull (1232–1315) and from the so-called *Autobiography* of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). The two narratives have much in common—neither is part of a systematic discussion of Christian-Muslim relations, but rather relate an encounter between a Muslim and a prominent Catholic personality before the beginning of his career, and both were recorded later in their lives.

In the *Vita coetanea*, a narrative of conversion and illumination, Llull has a debate with his Saracen slave (and teacher of Arabic), who blasphemed the name of Christ. After a long discussion, Llull beat the slave in his rage. The slave resisted, fought back, and wounded his master with a sword, shouting, “You are dead!” Llull was able to fend off the attack, and imprisoned the slave, but he faced a dilemma: executing his teacher of Arabic would have been too severe,

but releasing him—too dangerous. Llull prayed fervently to God, who appeared to remain silent. The dilemma is solved in a tragic way: the slave hung himself in prison and Llull “joyfully gave thanks to God, not only for keeping his hands innocent (*innoxias*) of the death of this Saracen but also for freeing him from that terrible perplexity concerning which he has just recently so anxiously asked Him for guidance” (166).

The episode involving Ignatius of Loyola occurred about 250 years later, in 1522. En route to Montserrat, near the town of Pedrola in Aragon, Ignatius met a Moor traveling on a mule. They began to discuss theology. When the conversation turned to Mary, the Moor said it seemed to him that the Virgin had indeed conceived without a man, but he could not believe in her giving birth and remaining a virgin. This comment aroused Ignatius's indignation against the Moor, and it seemed that he had done wrong in allowing the Moor to say such things about Mary. However, Ignatius was uncertain of how best to respond to this remark and uphold Our Lady's honor. “Tired of examining what would be best to do and not arriving at a definite conclusion,” Ignatius resolved to let the mule decide when the two men later parted. If the mule followed the Muslim, Ignatius would kill him; if his mule took the other path, he would spare him. Thanks to the mule's choice, the Muslim survived the encounter.

There is no evidence that Ignatius had access to the narrative of Llull's encounter, but there are many fascinating similarities between the two accounts, in particular the Christians' dilemmas, the necessary intervention of God (through the slave's suicide and the mule's decision), and the coexistence of violence and persuasion in the Christians' relationship with their Muslim interlocutors. Blum's elegant analysis of the two texts shows their connection with medieval and early modern literature, and sheds light on various possible interpretations.

Describing Ignatius's episode, Blum defines it as an important step in the spiritual journey that culminated with the vigil of arms in Montserrat, where he changed “the worldly knighthood into a spiritual one” (175). Ignatius, according to Blum, interpreted the choice of the mule as a message from God: “divert your itinerary away from your mission to the Muslims and towards what later would be called the Catholic Reformation!” (173). Blum also writes, “the drive to the Holy Land and to convert Muslims appears to be a mere impulse, the naïve calling of a descendant of the knightly class,” and “the Moor episode foretells the La Storta vision, which was held to be the key to the Jesuits' turning their mission away from the Muslims and toward reform within the Christian world” (175). Blum summarizes the meaning of the episode in this way: “regarding missions to non-believers: don't even try! Reform your own religious behavior instead” (176).