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THE TURKS AND ISLAM IN REFORMATION GERMANY

Gregory J. Miller



The Turks and Islam in Reformation Germany

Although their role is often neglected in standard historical narratives of the Reformation, the Ottoman Turks were an important concern of many leading thinkers in early modern Germany, including Martin Luther. In the minds of many, the Turks formed a fearsome, crescent-shaped horizon that threatened to break through and overwhelm. Based on an analysis of more than 300 pamphlets and other publications across all genres and including both popular and scholarly writings, this book is the most extensive treatment in English on views of the Turks and Islam in German-speaking lands during this period. In addition to providing a summary of what was believed about Islam and the Turks in early modern Germany, this book argues that new factors, including increased contact with the Ottomans as well as the specific theological ideas developed during the Protestant Reformation, destabilized traditional paradigms without completely displacing inherited medieval understandings. This book makes important contributions to understanding the role of the Turks in the confessional conflicts of the Reformation and to the broader history of Western views of Islam.

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1 Sixteenth-Century Bestsellers

Once only on the edges of early modern European scholarship and on the margins of maps, the Ottoman Turks have begun to be recognized as an important part of the mental world of sixteenth-century Europeans. As is the case with many kinds of otherness, when one becomes aware of them, the Turks seem to be everywhere in the period. In the first half of the sixteenth century alone, for example, over 600 books, pamphlets, ballads, and broadsheets with the Turks and/or Islam as the main subject were published in Western Europe. Throughout Europe, pamphlets reported one Ottoman victory after another. As far away as England, the ‘Turk’ was a catchword for unexpected attack and invasion. The confluence of this perceived danger with the Renaissance interest in the exotic produced a knowledge hunger that was fueled by the development of new print technology. Although it is tenuous to argue that the quantity of publication on a topic alone demonstrates the level of contemporary importance, it seems clear that sixteenth-century Europeans were fascinated with the Ottomans.¹

One particularly important subgenre of this *Turcica* was captivity narratives. For much of Western Europe in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, these narratives were among the few available sources concerning life in the Ottoman Empire behind what might be termed the ‘crescent curtain.’ Apart from Venetian news reports, until the mid-sixteenth century reports from former captives provided the most extensive information.² The wide distribution and multiple editions of these writings reflect a perennial human interest in stories about adventure, danger, and the exotic. There seems to have been something particularly intriguing about those that had been subjected to slavery and lived to tell the tale. The insider information they brought back both intrigued and scandalized their readers.³

Captivity narratives played a much greater role than simply entertainment, however. They had an enormous impact on the shaping of Western views of Islam. These ex-slaves wrote with authority. They could speak the languages of the Ottoman Empire. They had spent long years inside Turkey, seeing society in a way that, for example, a reporting itinerant traveler could not.⁴ Of course, the former captives did not and could not perfectly translate Turkish culture into written Latin. (Although there is much that is of interest

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in these writings even to historians of the Ottoman Empire.) The primary value of these writings is what they say about developing attitudes within Europe, and in particular, Western understandings of the Turks and Islam (See Figure 1.1).

In Reformation Germany two publications by former slaves of the Turks were particularly important. The *Tractatus de moribus Turcarum*, (c.1480) [Pamphlet on the Customs of the Turks] attributed to George of Hungary, and Bartholomew Georgijevic' two-part publication *De Turcarum ritu et caeremoniis* [On the Rituals and Ceremonies of the Turks] and *De afflictione tam captivorum quam etiam sub Turcae tributo viventium Christianorum* [On the Afflictions of the Captive Christians Living under the Tribute of the Turks] (both 1544).⁵ Both of these publications were reprinted numerous times and in whole or in part were translated into several vernaculars. These two authors are especially important for three reasons. Taken together, they give significant insight into the type of information about Islam that was widely circulated in Europe during the period. In comparison with material on Islam from earlier in the medieval period, considerably more information, and more accurate information, is known. In addition, because both authors claim to have written out of the experience of Ottoman slavery and escape, these documents can add to our understanding of religious boundaries between Islam and Christianity as imagined and constructed by early modern Europeans. These texts draw boundaries in a myriad of ways, from religious practices to bathroom etiquette and food culture. Finally, although the supposed regional origins and life stories of both former captives are remarkably similar, because they were penned almost seventy years apart, a comparative reading demonstrates considerable diversity in European responses to Islam and points to important developments in Western responses to the Muslim Ottomans from the Late Middle Ages to the early modern period that highlight the important transitional nature of the period. One central focus of this study is the analysis and comparison of these two publications (See Figure 1.2).

Of course, escaped slave reports make up only a fraction of the body of Western literature about Islam and the Turks in early modern Europe. The historical confluence of Ottoman expansion and the development of widespread moveable type printing created an explosion of small booklets and broadsheets about the 'exotic' Turks. This production was directly tied to the military conflict with the Ottoman Empire. Some pamphlets on the Turks were published each year, but production soared during periods of more intense military confrontation, especially the 1529 siege of Vienna, the 1532 Ottoman campaign, and the 1542 annexation of Hungary. When the threat increased, general interest in the Turks increased as well.

Although nearly every land with a printing industry published "little booklets on the Turks" (in German: *Türkenbüchlein*) the majority were published in Italy, France, the Low Countries, and especially in Germany. During the first half of the sixteenth century alone, more than 350 pieces

**Chronica vnnnd be-
schreibung der Türckey**
mit yhrem begriff/ ynnhalt / prouincien/
völcern/ ankunfft/ kriegē/ reysen/ glauben/ religi-
onen/ gesagen/ sytten/ geperdē/ weis/ regimentē/
frümkeyt/ vnnnd bosheiten/ von ein Sibens
bürger xxiij. jar darinn gefangen gelegen
yn Latein beschriben/ verteütscht

Mit eyner vorhed D.
Martini Lutheri.

zehen oder aylff Nation vnd Sec-
cten der Christenheyt

Anno / M. D. XXX.

Figure 1.1 Martin Luther's edition of George of Hungary, 1530

Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University. *GC5 L9774 En530t, Houghton Library, Harvard University

DE
TURCARVM
MORIBVS
EPITOME,

*

*Bartholomao Georgieniz
Peregrino au-
tore.*



LVGDVNI,
APVD IOAN. TORNAESIVM.
M. D. LVIII.

Figure 1.2 Georgijevic, *De turcarum moribus*, 1558

Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University. *ZHC5 G2958 552ld, Houghton Library, Harvard University

of literature specifically on the Turks were published in German-speaking lands. Very little of the significant body of sixteenth-century *Turcica* has been translated into English,⁶ despite the importance of this genre of literature in early modern Europe. This specific period is not only interesting because of the large number of publications on the Turks. It represents a high point of the Ottoman Empire's push into Central Europe and, at the same time, a significant event in the intellectual history of Western Europe due to the development of the Protestant Reformation. From the beginning of Protestantism, understandings of the Turks and evaluations of appropriate responses to them became embroiled in confessional debates.

Interest in the Turks was not limited to any genre. All printed genre contain works on the Turks. As has been expertly analyzed by Charlotte Colding Smith, visual images, some proclaiming their basis in eyewitness accounts, were broadcast by means of single-leaf woodcuts and illustrated publications small and large.⁷ Secular ballads and spiritual hymns concerning the Turks were printed. Sermons and prayers against the Ottomans were published along with political speeches and *Reichstag* decisions. Early newspapers (in German: *Neue Zeitungen*) kept interested people up to date on the latest events.⁸ In fact, according to Andrew Pettegree, "by far the greatest stimulus to the growth of the European news industry was the relentless encroachment of the Ottoman Empire."⁹

Organization of the Study

This study summarizes the views of Islam and the Turks presented in the great outpouring of literature on the Ottomans produced in German-speaking lands during the first half of the sixteenth century, that is, during the first generation of Protestant Reformers. While some of this literature originated outside of German-speaking lands, vernacular translations brought them into the German milieu and blended with the already significant number of native publications. Germans seemed to have been particularly interested in the Turks, in part due to the Hapsburg-Ottoman rivalry but also because the first generation of German Reformers (especially Martin Luther) were themselves interested in the Turks and Islam.¹⁰ In order to understand these publications, two layers of context need to be established. I begin with a short summary of the intellectual context through a survey of the development of Western attitudes toward Islam and the Turks prior to 1520. The political context is established through a summary of the engagement between the Ottomans and Europe in Reformation-era Germany.

A central contribution of this study is the content analysis of more than 300 publications from German-speaking lands that discuss the Turks and/or Islam and were printed between 1520 and 1550, that is, between the accession of Sulaiman the Magnificent and publication of the final edition of Theodor Bibliander's Qur'an. Most of the authors of these publications make no distinction between the 'Turks' and Islam and often use the terms

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as synonyms. However, for reasons of topical analysis, I devote one chapter to descriptions of social, cultural, and military aspects of the Turks in particular. A second chapter surveys understandings of religious aspects of Islam that sometimes were applied to the Muslim world more generally.

There are two questions at the heart of most of these publications: why are the infidel Turks seemingly invincible against Christendom? What is the appropriate Christian response? The chapter ‘Holy Terror’ surveys the answers to the first question found in these pamphlets and the chapter ‘Holy War’ discusses answers to the second. Here, too, the Protestant Reformation, as seen for example both in Martin Luther’s absolute denunciation of the Crusade as a blasphemous confusion of spiritual and temporal, and in various Anabaptist disavowals of all warfare, was a catalyst for new developments that influenced the history of Christian-Islamic relations. I conclude with a more detailed comparison and contrast of the two main escaped slave narratives in the broader context of the Reformation in Germany. In appendices are found lengthy selections both of George of Hungary and Bartholomew Georgijevic. No modern English translation of either of these influential publications has previously been available. The translations have been made from their printings accompanying the first published Latin Qur’an, Theodor Bibliander’s *Machumetis saracenorum principis* (1543, second edition 1550). This three-volume equivalent of an ‘encyclopedia of Islam’ is the form in which these pamphlets would have been read by scholars throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹¹ Because of their attempt to provide Europeans not only with theological and political guidance concerning the Turks but also because they attempted to portray all aspects of life and culture concerning the Ottoman, George of Hungary and Bartholomew Georgijevic provide the best short summary of the general understandings of Islam and the Turks available to Western Europeans (See Figure 1.3).

Paradigm Shifts

Over the last twenty-five years, several studies of the perceptions of the Muslim world in Western Europe have challenged the dominant metanarrative that early modern Europeans had a binary understanding of their relationship with the Islamic world. The most interesting work recently has been done in the area of early modern English dramatic literature.¹² These studies have demonstrated that ‘Islam and the West’ in the early modern period is more complicated than it has been portrayed. Matthew Dimmock and Jonathan Burton demonstrate, for example, how Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* continuously violates stereotypes and common lines of division, highlighting the “period’s conditional suspension and activation of anti-Islamic prejudice.”¹³ Gerald MacLean describes an “ambiguous representation of the Ottoman Empire” as both a “realm of tyrannous slavery and a space where Britons might do rather well for themselves.”¹⁴ Thus, “attitudes

MACHV METIS SA- racenorum principis, eius que

SUCCESSORVM VITAE, DOCTRINA, AC IPSE

ALCORAN,

Quo uelut authenico legum diuinarum codice Agareni & Turcæ, alijsq; CHRISTO aduersantes populi reguntur. quæ ante annos CCCC, uir multis nominibus, Diui quoq; Bernardi testimonio, clarissimus, D. Petrus Abbas Cluniacensis, per uiros eruditos, ad fidei Christianæ ac sanctæ matris Ecclesiæ propugnationem, ex Arabica lingua in Latinam transferri curauit.

His adiunctæ sunt CONFVTATIONES multorū, & quidem probatis. authorum, Arabum, Græcorum, & Latinorū, una cum doctiss. uiri PHILIPPI MELANCHTHONIS præmonitione. Quibus uelut instructissima fidei Catholicæ propugnatorum acie, peruersa dogmata & tota superstitione Machumetica profligantur.

Adiuncti sunt etiam De Turcarum, siue Sarracenorum (qui non tam sectatores Machumetica uasaniæ, quàm uindices & propugnatores, nominisq; Christiani acerrimos hostes, aliquot iam seculis præstiterunt) origine, ac rebus gestis, à DCCCC annis ad nostra usq; tempora, Libelli aliorum lectu dignissimi.

Quorum omnium Catalogum uersa cuiusq; tomii prima pagina reperies.

Hæc omnia in unum uolumen redacta sunt, opera & studio THEODORI BIBLIANDRI, Ecclesiæ Tigurinae ministri, qui collatis etiam exemplaribus Latinis & Arab. Alcorani textum emendauit, & marginibus apposuit Annotationes, quibus doctrina Machumetica absurditas, contradictiones, origines errorum, diuinæq; scripturæ deprauationes, atq; alia id genus indicantur. Quæ quidem in lucem edidit ad gloriam Domini IESV CHRISTI, & multiplicem Ecclesiæ utilitatem, aduersus Satanam principem tenebrarum, eiusq; nuncium Antichristum: quem oportet manifestari, & confici spiritu oris CHRISTI Seruatoris nostri.

ANNO SALVTIS HVMA-
næ, M. D. L. Mense Martio.

Figure 1.3 Title page of Bibliander's Qur'an compilation, 1550

Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University. GC5 B4716 543md, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

towards peoples and cultures of Muslim North Africa . . . were certainly more complicated, varied, and indeed more self-reflexive than some twentieth century historians would have us believe.”¹⁵ Similar ambiguity is demonstrated by the work of Thomas Burman on the study of the Qur’an in the late medieval and early modern periods. Burman’s research contradicts the common presumption that polemics always trumped philology in Western study of the Qur’an. In fact, he demonstrates that scholars used a variety of reading strategies from derogatory polemic to pure linguistic interest—and sometimes within the work of the same translator.¹⁶ Charlotte Colding Smith’s conclusions on the way that the Turks were represented visually in Germany during the sixteenth century also supports this position.¹⁷ Of course, it is possible to find enough material from the received tradition in early modern European accounts to argue that the understanding of Islam which developed in the medieval west persisted long after the end of the Middle Ages (or indeed even down to the present day). But this obscures the interesting fluidity of early modern Western approaches to Islam and can lead to an inaccurate essentializing—this time not of ‘Islam’ but of western views of Islam.

With due respect to the enormous influence of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, I argue for what might be termed a ‘post-Said’ understanding of the West’s views of Islam in the early modern period. Said argued that a certain discourse about the Muslim world in the West created a binary of ‘occident’ and ‘orient’ for the express purpose of domination and control, and located the origin of that discourse in the early modern period.¹⁸ In contrast, I argue that despite many shared images and themes, early modern European understandings of Islam did not originate in an attempt to dominate or to justify domination—nor could they in light of Ottoman political and military power. In addition, I argue that there was much more diversity and ambiguity in Western views of Islam than Edward Said recognizes. My study, then, can be seen in part as a continuation of the one made by Margaret Meserve in *Empires of Islam* concerning how fifteenth-century humanists understood the origins of the Turks. She argues that “there was no one Oriental other” in the fifteenth century, either in geopolitical reality or in the conceptions of Europeans.¹⁹ Likewise, the writings on Islam that form the center of this study do not speak with a single voice or perspective. They reveal to us how knowledge about Islam gets translated, modified, re-used, altered in its purposes, and adjusted to an audience and the demands of authority structures. These publications are often at odds with themselves and self-contradictory. Although most of these authors would not have desired a new view of Islam to develop, the ambivalence of these texts helped to destabilize and create space for new information and new perspectives to break through. This is a complexity of which cursory readings are oblivious. Residual, emergent, traditional, and innovative perspectives all can occur at the same time in a culture, some of which may be more dominant than others. It is important to identify trends, emergences, changes, and especially underlying shifts in

the framework of understanding. There is much more going on in early modern understandings of Islam than simple ‘medieval’ disparagement or the seeds of a later orientalism. And the Reformation was a critical factor in these developments.

Notes

1. For the broader context of medieval and early modern Western understandings of Islam, see especially: Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance humanists and the Ottoman Turks*; John Victor Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*; Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought*; David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto, *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other*; Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose*; Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, 2nd ed.; Clarence Rouillard, *The Turk in French History, Thought and Literature*; and Richard Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*.
2. For European captivity narratives in general, see Linda Colley, *Captives*; Ellen G. Friedman, *Spanish Captives in North Africa in the Early Modern Age*; Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*; and Daniel J. Vitkus, ed., *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*.
3. “Bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts waren es—abgesehen von der venezianischen Nachrichtenerhebung—vor allem ehemalige Gefangenen gewesen, die dem von der *Türkengefahr* erschütterten Europa ausführlichere Einblicke auf das Leben am Bosphorus ermöglichten.” Almut Höfert, *Den Feind beschreiben: “Türkengefahr” und europäisches Wissen über das Osmanische Reich 1450–1600*, 226. Until the mid-sixteenth century almost exclusively reporters who described the Ottoman Empire from extended experience were captives; after 1550 it was diplomats. It might even be possible to detect a hint of this transition even within the writings of the Hapsburg diplomat Busbecq. His first letter depends at least in part on earlier publications, the remaining letters seem not to be dependent on any previous sources and express his own understandings. See *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq: Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople 1554–1562*.
4. Traveler’s reports and captivity narratives should be considered distinct genres of Western European/Christian writings on the Muslim world. On traveler’s reports in general, see: Gerald MacLean, *The Rise of Oriental Travel: English Visitors to the Ottoman Empire, 1580–1720*; Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna G. Singh, eds., *Travel Knowledge: European “Discoveries” in the Early Modern Period*; Kenneth Parker, ed., *Early Modern Tales of Orient: A Critical Anthology*; and Gerald MacLean, ed., *Re-orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East*.
5. Especially in light of the significance of these two writings, not a great deal of research has been done on them. The most important work has been done by Reinhard Klockow who has published a scholarly edition of George of Hungary with introduction: *Georgius de Hungaria. Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia Turcorum. Traktat über die Sitten, die Lebensverhältnisse und die Arglist der Türken. Nach der Erstausgabe von 1481 herausgegeben, übersetzt und eingeleitet von Reinhard Klockow*. He has also edited (with Monika Ebertowski) a limited edition, hand typeset museum printing of a different Georgievic writing, *De captivitate sua apud Turcas*. In 1920 a short biographical

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and bibliographical pamphlet concerning Georgijevic's life was written for the Vienna Nationalbibliothek by Franz Kidric, *Bartholomaeus Gjorgjevic: Biographische und Bibliographische Zusammenfassung*. In English the only writings I am aware of on these two authors are: Michael Heath "Bartholomaeus Georgiewitz: Exile, Slave, and Propagandist" and J.A.B. Palmer, "Fr. Georgius de Hungaria, O.P. and the Tractatus de Moribus Concionibus et Nequicia Turcorum." There are numerous scholarly works on early modern pamphlet literature, travel writing, etc. which mention these two authors and provide brief descriptions, most importantly, Carl Göllner, *Turcica: Die europäischen Türkendrucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts*.

6. Two of Luther's main three writings on the Turks can be found in the American Edition. (*On War Against the Turks* (v. 46, pp. 155–205) and *Admonition to Prayer Against the Turks* (v. 43, pp. 213–241). Otherwise, I am aware of only Johann Brenz' *Booklet on the Turk: How Preachers and Laymen Should Conduct Themselves if the Turk were to Invade Germany* (1537) and Veit Dietrich's *How Preachers Should Exhort the People to Repentance and Earnest Prayer Against the Turk* (1542) have been translated, both by John Bohnstedt in "The Infidel Scourge of God: the Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era."
7. See Charlotte Colding Smith, *Images of Islam, 1453–1600: Turks in Germany and Central Europe*.
8. Although each year brought some publications on the Turks, the quantity peaked during the more intense times of Ottoman-Hapsburg conflict and especially during the years surrounding the 1529 siege of Vienna. There was considerable variety in these publications, from single-sheet woodcuts emphasizing Turkish atrocities to Theodor Bibliander's 1543 several hundred-page collection of more learned polemics and descriptions of Islam. In terms of numbers alone, the largest single type of pamphlet concerning the Turks were the sixteenth century equivalent of the newspaper, the *Avisso* or *Neue Zeitung*. No scrap of news seemed to be too small for these short publications. One *Neue Zeitung* featured a dialogue with a captured Turk despite the fact that most of the answers the Turk gave were simply "Ich weiss nicht."
9. Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*, 141.
10. The most extensive treatment of Martin Luther's engagement with Islam is *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* by Adam Francisco.
11. Together, they make up almost one-third of the final volume of Bibliander's Qur'an. In fact, it appears that the new availability of the Geogijevic pamphlets was the primary motivation for the production of the second edition of Bibliander's work. See Gregory J. Miller, "Theodor Bibliander's *Machumetis saracenorum principis eiusque successorum vitae, doctrina ac ipse alcoran* (1543) as the Sixteenth Century 'Encyclopedia' of Islam."
12. For example, see Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626*; Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England*; Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama 1579–1624*; and Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630*. In terms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English history writing, the same ambiguity is described by Anders Ingram in *Writing the Ottomans: Turkish History in Early Modern England*, 140.
13. Dimmock, 135–161. The quote is from Burton, 54.
14. Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800*, 87.

15. MacLean, *Looking East*, 68.
16. See Thomas Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560*.
17. Smith, 177–179.
18. Part of the opposition to Said is due to misunderstanding and oversimplifying his arguments. However, there is increasing criticism even among those who have accurately read him. For example, Ivan Kalmer has chided Said's failure to engage theology in any significant way. For example, see Ivan Kalmar, *Early Orientalism*.
19. Meserve, 11.

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2 The Intellectual Context

Western Views of Islam in the Late Middle Ages

I stood and stared; he saw me and stared back; then with his hands wrenched open his own breast, crying "See how I rend myself! What rack mangles Mahomet! Weeping without rest, Ali before me goes, his whole face slit by one great stroke upward from chin to crest. All those whom thou beholdest in the pit were sowers of scandal, sowers of schism abroad while they yet lived; therefore they now go split.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII

By the end of the crusading period in the Levant, the long-term foundation of Christian Europe's understanding of Islam had been established. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, medieval scholars collected a body of knowledge concerning Islam and detailed permissible responses to the Islamic threat.¹ With few exceptions this corpus was simply reinforced and repeated through the remainder of the period and, in part, persisted long into European history. With little variance from author to author, late medieval depictions of Islam were so similar because they used each other in a chain of sources, simply repeating the information on Islam which had been passed down to them.

Accurate information concerning the essentials of Islamic belief was available to medieval scholars and, to a lesser degree, even to the general population. However, Christian writers developed a picture of Islam which was intentionally distorted. They interpreted data specifically in a manner favorable to Christianity and unacceptable to Islam. There was little attempt to understand what was known or to communicate with Muslims.

Among other assertions, Muhammad was portrayed as dishonest and insincere as a prophet, as a promoter of violence in order to establish his religion, self-indulgent concerning sexuality, and a Christian heretic and schismatic. In aggregate form these inaccuracies created what Norman Daniel described as a "frontier of mental attitudes", that was "emphatically defined and crossed only with the greatest difficulty."²

One of the reasons these inaccuracies proved to be so intractable was because they served a specific purpose in the foundation of the concept of

Europe. When Europe began to recover from the turmoil and invasions of the Early Middle Ages, because of a strong religious element, it began to identify itself more and more with Christianity. Europe needed a negative image against which it could fight; this was provided by a distorted image of Islam, a psychological ‘shadow side’ of European identity.³ As Suzanne Akbari has described in her excellent study *Idols in the East*, the wide range of European writings on Islam, from the fanciful to the scholarly, were united in projecting an idolatrous orient in direct opposition to the true faith of Christendom.⁴ A proper understanding of this foundational medieval view of Islam provides the necessary background from which sixteenth-century developments can be analyzed.

Late Medieval Scholars of Islam and Their Sources

Western scholars in the late medieval period who desired information concerning Islam had access potentially to a variety of sources. Polemic writings from the East and travelers’ accounts made accessible firsthand knowledge of the Muslim world. The Qur’an was available, both in Arabic and in translation. Authentic Muslim sources were less frequently used, however. Christian scholars invariably preferred Christian sources. When Muslim sources were used, such as in the Iberian corpus (see below), deliberate editing in the service of polemics frequently took place.⁵ If there were discrepancies among accounts, for example, the Christian account was always accepted over the Muslim. Thomas Burman’s research on Latin translators of the Qur’an, however, has demonstrated how complex this process could be and how pure linguistic interest often superseded polemic.⁶

Available Eastern Christian anti-Muslim polemical writings include the “Syrian Apology” and the works of John of Damascus.⁷ The struggle for survival of minority Christian groups in Muslim lands helps to explain the violent, imaginative language used in this literature. These lurid stories were an important source of the West’s misconceptions.⁸ Although his work did not circulate widely in the Middle Ages,⁹ an example of an important medieval source on Islam from a traveler to the Levant is Ricoldo de Monte Croce. As was the case with many Eastern sources, although Ricoldo spent a number of years in direct contact with Islam, his anti-Muslim writings remained extreme and are filled with errors and calumnies.¹⁰

Iberian sources were particularly influential and represented the single largest group of writings available to medieval scholars.¹¹ The popularity of these few works was probably due to their combination of amusement, instruction, and controversy in an easy-reading format.¹² The most important of the Iberian manuscripts is the so-called Cluniac corpus.¹³ This collection of writings on Islam was begun under the initiative of Abbot Peter the Venerable who in 1141–43 visited Benedictine Abbeys in Spain and became interested in Islamic polemics.

The centerpiece of the Cluniac corpus was the *Liber legis Saracenorum quem Alcoran vocant*, a Latin paraphrase of the Qur’an with many marginal

and interlinear notations. This work was completed in 1143 by the Cluniac monk Robert of Ketton with the help of a native translator.¹⁴ Mark of Toledo later authored a more literal translation of the Qur'an, but it was Ketton's work (a paraphrase intended to explain or illumine the original text) rather than Mark of Toledo's literal translation that was widespread during the Middle Ages.¹⁵

Of the medieval scholars who worked on Islam, Nicholas Cusa, deserves special comment.¹⁶ Because of direct involvement in the East-West negotiations leading to the Council of Florence, Cusa developed an intense interest in Islam and produced two works that had a significant influence on later views: *De Pace Fidei* and the *Cribatio Alchoran*.¹⁷

In *De Pace Fidei* Cusa suggested an international colloquium as the best approach for peace and the conversion of Muslims. The *Cribatio*, the more important of the two writings, was a complex polemic that 'sifted' the Qur'an and found elements of (Christian) truth. Both works were characterized by careful scholarship and attempted accuracy, even though he had only Ketton's Qur'an and Ricoldo for sources.¹⁸ In an age dominated by Crusade ideology and scholastic theology, Cusa's scholarship is unique in both its relatively irenic tone and in the use of a methodological reductionism to reconcile Christian and Muslim beliefs (of course, in the end always convincing Muslims of the truth of Christianity).

Late Medieval Knowledge and Depictions of Islam

The audience for Western writings concerning Islam was Christian, despite the popularity of the Muslim-Christian dialogue format. The writings "were admirably formulated to uphold faith. They would suitably horrify those who were at a distance from actual Muslims, but they would also fortify those who could not be guarded physically from Islamic realities. All alike would be confirmed in their suspicion and contempt."¹⁹ Since it was certainly easier to win an argument against a paper opponent, and since the Christians always won, these writings tended to give Christendom a certain self-respect in dealing with a civilization in many ways its superior.

Because of the polemic context of their writings, medieval authors concerned themselves with Islamic subjects not to describe Islam accurately, but to compare it with Christianity. One point is clear: the paradigmatic understanding of Islam in the Middle Ages was that it was a Christian heresy. This underlying argument of the superiority of Christianity not only dictated which Islamic subjects would be discussed (and which would not), but also the order in which Islamic subjects would be treated.

The traditional first and dominating argument was that Muhammad could have been no true prophet and certainly no Messiah. Arguments concerning the inferiority and inconsistency of the Qur'an and of Muslim theology and spirituality followed. Only toward the end of the Middle Ages did scholars demonstrate any sustained interest in the institutions and history of Islam and the Ottoman Turks.

Christian polemicists depicted Muhammad as the central figure and originator of Islam, and used his life as the starting point of their arguments. His claim to be the divine mouthpiece (prophet) was known and transmitted through the Latin translation of the *shahadah*: “Non est deus nisi Deus, Mahamad est nuncius Dei.” [There is no God except God; Muhammad is God’s representative.]²⁰ For the Christian scholastics, a prophet demonstrated his divine call by purity of life, presentation of true miracles, and the fulfillment and truthfulness of all his sayings. Every Latin writer presented Muhammad’s life in such a way as to prove his incompatibility with the three aspects of this definition.²¹ If they disproved his prophetic calling, they considered themselves to have disproved Islam itself.

Several themes were consistently used to demonstrate the depravity of Muhammad’s life. Many sources emphasize his ‘low birth,’ pagan, or idolatrous background. Even the medieval etymology of the designation ‘Saracen’ was wrongly seen as a claim to descent from ‘Sara’ to cover up Agarene (that is, from Hagar), barbarian blood.

Muhammad also was shown to have schemed himself into authority through deception. Some portrayed him as a renegade Christian, a cardinal who had been denied the papacy and in return maliciously initiated a heretical schism, as seen in Dante’s *Inferno*. With the help of instructors in heresy or black magic, such as the Nestorian monk Sergius, he was able to deceive the ignorant Arabs into believing he was a divine messenger. Medieval scholars attempted to disprove the validity of Muhammad’s miracles, and instead credited demonic power, trained animals, or magic devices.²² Muhammad’s deceptive revelatory utterances were seen as demonically inspired, or at best, self-generated. The claim that he suffered from epileptic (or self-induced) fits was common. Frequently, demonic possession was added as the source of his inspiration.

After gaining power by means of deception, Muhammad was said to have maintained his power by violence and by allowing lascivious sexuality. Muslim violence and the extension of Islam by the sword was consistently stressed, especially in contrast to humble, peripatetic Christian missionaries. Usually writers attributed Muhammad’s violence to a base desire for plunder and possessions, but emphasized Muslim hatred and destruction of things Christian.

Even without invention or exaggeration, no Christian would have believed Muhammad’s sexual life to be proper. Polygamy proved that he was lascivious; in fact, some argued that he made up ‘revelations’ on the spot to justify his lecherous actions.²³ The ability to have multiple wives and concubines was widely believed to be one of the chief enticements of Islam.

Because a good death is the proof of a saintly life, Muhammad was given a horrible death by Latin writers. Some writers could not determine the most horrible of the different traditions and so simply listed them all. Frequently used themes included: death and devouring by swine, poisoning by a Jewess, death in Aishah’s arms (with sexual innuendo), and the problems