

Early Outreaches from Medieval Christendom to the Muslim East: Wolfram von Eschenbach, Ramon Llull and Nicholas of Cusa Explore Options to Communicate with Representatives of Arabic Islam: Tolerance already in the Middle Ages?

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Introduction: Past and present, literature and philosophy

With the rise of monotheism in antiquity, Judaism being the first religion embracing that concept, followed by Christianity and subsequently Islam, humanity has experienced tremendous problems ever since, probably because of the absolutist claim by each party on being God's chosen people. With the strong faith that the God of one's own faith is the only and true one in the universe and that hence all other religions are utterly wrong, or at least blind, such as in the way how the Christians tended to blame the Jews, most possible channels of communication have broken down and endanger the harmonious coexistence of people on a global level ever since.¹

Today, of course, we live in the world of the post-Enlightenment, and generally believe, I hope, that faith is a matter of highly personal conviction, while the political interaction and communication among people from countless different ethnic and cultural background must be predicated on tolerance, openness toward otherness, and the willingness to accept every human being in his or her own cultural and religious framework and identity. Intriguingly, in the wake of the catastrophic 9/11 scenario in New York, interfaith services have been held all over the United States and probably beyond as well, and there is hope worldwide that religious differences might be put to rest without simply blending all religions together in the name of Irenicism, Ecumenism, and interfaith dialogue. As a rabbi once told me, God is located on a mountain, and there are many paths that lead to the summit.² Intriguingly, and most significantly for our overarching theme, interfaith dialogue also takes place in Islamic and other societies,³ and I venture to suggest that much of terrorist violence in many countries today is intimately tied in with dogmatism, ideological radicalism, and the fear of those contacts with other religions and other cultural values. The more we all begin to embrace tolerant attitudes, the more violent the counter-reaction seems to be. Our task as scholars hence consists of addressing the history of those contacts between the religion as far back as in the Middle Ages and thus to lay the foundation for future communication because there is so much common ground among all world religions.⁴ And there is so much need for love and peace on our tortured globe.⁵

This more open-minded position, slowly and painfully developed at the latest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among Western European thinkers, such as Herbert of Cherbury in his *The Life and Reign of King Henry the Eighth* (1649), the German playwright and essayist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his truly famous drama *Nathan the Wise* (1779), the American politician and later president Thomas Jefferson in his law regarding religious freedom (1779), and the journalist and essayist Thomas Paine in his declaration of human rights (1791).⁶ Tolerance continues to be a great challenge for mankind at large, as the horrible wars, terrorist attacks, internecine strife in many countries of our world,

bombings, and other forms of killings indicate today. Ideas do have some effect at large, both negatively and positively, but they always prove to be tenuous and subject to criticism and objections, or they are simply ignored, forgotten, and left out. Toleration, very distinct from tolerance, already represents a noble value in human life, but it has always had a hard time in influencing more than just a handful of intellectual, open-minded, and sensitive people, probably because maintaining a dominant religion in a specific country or region is intimately tied in with political power and economic advantages.

Human life is perhaps best described as an ongoing effort to deal with existential constraints, conflicts, and challenges, and people have always fought over ideas more than anything else. In fact, ideas, specifically beliefs, faith, convictions, and ideological viewpoints, have constantly proven to be the critical watershed where tensions arise and create huge barriers, if they do not trigger a flood of violence and hence war. Voltaire's (1694–30; May 1778) numerous appeals to his contemporaries to practice tolerance were only one of many voices, and we could easily identify human history at least since the Middle Ages as a steady flow of mostly desperate efforts to overcome violence and to make people agree to disagree in a peaceful fashion.⁷ As Voltaire states in one of his essays (1763): "It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?" (chap. 21).⁸ Most intellectuals today would certainly subscribe to Voltaire's comments, but reality seems quite different in many parts of our world. The religious and hence military conflicts continue to burden mankind, threatening actually to bring it to the brink of annihilation because of differences in ideas, faith, and ideologies. So, following Voltaire, could that indeed be the goal of God, whether in the Islamic or in the Christian tradition?

Before I turn to my actual topic, let me quickly summarize the crucial point of the famous "ring parable" as told by Lessing, who in turn had culled the essential parts from Boccaccio's masterpiece, his *Decameron* (ca. 1350).⁹ In Lessing's play, the Jew Nathan is put into a quandary by the Sultan Saladin in Jerusalem because the latter wants to extort money from him by way of posing the problematic, if not impossible, question of which one of the three world religions deserves to be regarded as the only true one. The Sultan explains that a wise person such as the Jew would not simply adhere to his faith simply out of family tradition and filial piety. On the contrary, there would have to be reasons, conclusions, critical arguments favoring one over the other religion. Nathan at first is deeply puzzled, not sure what to make of the request, especially since it is so unusual for a Muslim ruler to inquire about truth in religious matters. Moreover, he is truly worried that Saladin might want to force him to convert to Islam, but then Nathan hits upon a story which he tells the Sultan as his answer. He is so sure of the universal value of his story that he announces that he would like the entire world to hear it.

This narrative deals with a man who owns a most valuable ring that has the power to make the wearer to be loved by everyone. In order to ensure that the ring stays within the family as an heirloom, he issues a law that the ring would be passed on only to the one son whom the father loves the most. One day, however, there is a father who has three equally obedient and loving sons, and he just does not know how to decide among them as his ultimate heir. Finally, undermining the family law in a way, he has two other rings made that replicate the original ring perfectly. Before the father dies, he secretly hands over one of the rings to each of his sons, who later naturally begin to quarrel amongst each other as to who holds the original ring. They finally go to a judge, and each one insists on holding the true ring, which is, in a way, correct, because the father had handed it over to him in secret and privacy, as an expression of the inner confidentiality between two people so closely related to each other in blood.

The judge at first refuses to decide which ring would be the right one, but then suddenly remembers the central property of the ring, to make the one who wears the authentic one to be loved by people. He sends them away and tells them to believe to own the true ring since their father had entrusted it to him. In order to help the ring to manifest its full strength, each one of them should lead an ideal life, share love, and demonstrate his honest belief in God. Subsequently, after thousand years, when a much wiser judge would sit on his throne, their descendants should return to court and bring evidence confirming that they hold the original ring.

Saladin immediately realizes the foolishness of his request, understands how impossible it would be to decide in a rational, mechanical, and logical manner what religion represents the true one, and humbles himself before Nathan, calling himself dust, a nothing, and declares that he is not at all the judge to decide the case, since only God would be the one to decide in this fundamental case.¹⁰

Significantly, Lessing had borrowed the essential aspects and the literary material for his play from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Day One, Third Tale), where the basic narrative elements are all the same, with the one decisive difference that there the bearer of the ring does not automatically exert more popularity and is not simply liked more by people.¹¹ Nevertheless, here as well, the true dilemma consists of the father's love for his three sons none of whom he can privilege over the others. In Boccaccio's tale, the Jew concludes his story differently and offers the interpretation himself: "My Lord, I say it is the same with the three Laws given by God our Father to three peoples, concerning which you have questioned me. Each of them thinks it has the inheritance, the true Law, and carries out His Commandments; but which does have it is a question as far from being settled as that of the rings."¹²

As both Boccaccio and Lessing, and countless poets and critics after them, have consistently brought to the forefront of the literary discourse, we read or listen to poetry and music above all because here we confront, surreptitiously and most powerfully, the ultimate message regarding the meaning of human life. War and killings are, unfortunately, permanent problems in human history, but artists, poets, and composers are confronted with their central task to develop esoteric expressions of everything that constitutes human life in its ideal form. While the search for love and God has certainly been central throughout time, the quest for human happiness, peace, harmony, and a fundamental understanding of the meaning of all existence either in religious or in philosophical terms occupies a critical position in everything we do.

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Historical perspectives

All three world religions are here and will not go away. Tensions and conflicts among them, unfortunately, will likewise continue into the future, but they are also consistently accompanied by voices from the past that have struggled hard to overcome such problems, especially the hostility. Mankind will only survive ultimately if we finally learn how to develop and embrace tolerance to the degree possible for each individual without abandoning one's own culture, identity, and belief system. In order to gain a better grasp of this relevant discourse in its historical dimension, I will first survey how the idea of tolerance fared in antiquity and the Middle Ages, and then will turn to several voices that addressed the question how individuals from different religions could co-exist.¹³

While in the Roman Empire virtually all religions were accepted and tolerated, as long as the supremacy of the Emperor was not questioned, counting him in even among the gods, with the rise of Christianity the situation changed considerably. After a long and bloody history of bitter conflicts, in the Edict of Milan from 313, initiated and signed by the Emperors Constantine I and Licinius, Christians were no longer persecuted, and the

Christian faith was accepted as one among many. In 392, however, Emperor Theodosius moved one radical step further and declared that the Christian faith was to be regarded as the state religion. From that time on all representatives of other religions became victims of persecutions, once they were identified as “heretics.” The issue with heretics was of greatest importance for the Christian Church ever since because no one was supposed to be forced to join the Christian faith, unless s/he did so voluntarily. By the same token, the heretics were Christians who had voluntarily turned their back to the Christian religion and were thus to be destroyed. This was formulated most systematically by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*, II II q. 10–11, but there is a long history of treatises and tracts on heresy in the medieval Christian Church. Jews, by contrast, enjoyed a considerable degree of toleration far into the late Middle Ages, since Pope Gregory I had taken them into his protection, which various church councils (such as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215) reconfirmed. However, that later changed dramatically, especially with the appearance of the Black Death in 1347, from when on European Jewry suffered from many persecutions and pogroms.¹⁴

Specifically the persecution of heretics became a critical task for the legal arm of the Christian Church, the Inquisition, mostly supported by the Dominicans. While the death penalty for heretics was first rejected, by the twelfth century this changed, especially in the wake of the horrendous crusade against the Cathars and Albigensians.¹⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux had still argued that heretics had to be persuaded by means of words (preaching and debates)—here disregarding his subsequent opinion that in the case of recalcitrance and obnoxious resistance the worldly prosecution (death penalty) was to be approved¹⁶—but by 1184 the episcopal Inquisition was instituted which from then on resorted to the practice of burning at the stake in order to deal effectively with heretics. Emperor Frederick II identified death by fire as the standard penalty for heresy in 1224, and soon Pope Gregory IX included this brutal approach into church law.¹⁷

Interestingly, and most importantly for our topic, the Islamic religion appears to have embraced a much larger degree of toleration/tolerance in the Middle Ages since both Jews and Christians were citizens who simply deserved the government’s protection, although they had to pay a hefty extra tax (*jizya*) as a symbol of their contemptibility and in return for their protection by the state (*dhimma*). So they never fully enjoyed the same rights and privileges as their Islamic contemporaries.¹⁸ Muslims, on the other hand, who left their faith were regarded as apostates who had to be executed. Of course, from a historical perspective, every religion, large and small, had to cope with endless struggles over the proper reading of the basic texts and messages, and there would not be any major world religion that had not to accept fundamental changes, had not to deal with profound internal disruptions, and had not faced enormous challenges from within and without. Tolerance in Islam, for instance, emerges as a rich field of investigations, which I cannot address here to the true extent necessary.¹⁹ It would be worth, for instance, turning to the situation in medieval Spain until 1492 when the last Arabic-Islamic kingdom, Granada, with its famous Alhambra, was finally crushed, since the so-called *convivencia* on the Iberian Peninsula throughout the Middle Ages was a significant factor, here disregarding many internal conflicts that pitted some radical Islamic groups against others.²⁰

Medieval literature is critically concerned with the conflicts and tensions between the Christian West and the Islamic East, although it will remain rather doubtful as to how much the individual writers and poets actually understood about the culture, values, ideals, and beliefs of the respective other sides. We can be certain, however, that there were certainly more attempts by Western travelers, including pilgrims and merchants, to explore the East than the other way around. For instance, Marco Polo left us with his *Il Miglione* (ca. 1292) a most remarkable document about his experiences while traversing the entire Asian continent on his way to and from the Mongol capitol in modern-day China. But Ibn Battuta, who visited the Near East, Asia, and Africa from 1325 to 1354, never crossed the

borders to a Christian kingdom, except for Constantinople (ch. XIII).²¹ Ibn Fadlan traveled into the vast territories today identified as Kazakhstan and Russia, meeting northern Viking cultures there (921–922). Ibrahīm ibn Ya’qūb, a Jewish merchant from Tortosa, went so far as to northwestern Germany, reporting about Magdeburg, Schleswig, and Mainz (965).²² And Usama Ibn Munqidh (1095–1188) reflected on his contacts with the crusaders, some of whom he regarded as friends, but most of whom he identified as barbarians.²³

As a proviso, however, travel or contacts with foreigners all by itself is not a guarantee for learning to perceive other cultures and other peoples in their own terms, since preconceived notions and stereotypes carry much weight and easily put strong lenses before the eyes of the curious, but then often rather self-centered visitors. After all, the vast corpus of pilgrimage accounts produced especially in the late Middle Ages and the early modern age does not ever clearly signal that a cultural or religious learning process, catapulting the author out of his or her traditional mind-set, would have happened. However, in the fifteenth century an increasing number of writers signal at least partially how much they were truly impressed by what they observed in the foreign world, that they met friendly and hospitable people, and that they felt safe and welcome in Arabic and Islamic territories. Arnold von Harff’s comments about Cairo (ca. 1497), for instance, demonstrate that he had a culturally transforming experience in that huge city and recognized and acknowledged openly the superiority of the cultural, economic, political, and administrative development there.²⁴

What were the actual interactions and exchanges between European Christians and Arabic Muslims during earlier periods? How did individual authors view their religious contemporaries beyond the limits of the Christian Church? In the limited space of this paper I can only bring to light a few important voices and correlate them, so to speak, with their descendants in the eighteenth century, although I would be always very careful in the use of the word “tolerance,” especially in the premodern period.²⁵ I can only deal with literary and philosophical projections, not with any actual documentation of historically verifiable exchanges between representatives of both religions and cultures. Nevertheless, considering what some Europeans were able and willing to say publicly regarding Muslims, or non-Christians at large, constitutes a remarkable break with the tradition of medieval “Orientalization” (Edward Said) and the power structures established by the Christian Church.

To argue that here we face an outrageous form of bigotry already in the premodern world, as Jerold C. Frakes angrily formulates, “as a single reiteration of a recurring mode of Euro-Christian responses to the Other,”²⁶ throws out the proverbial baby with the bath water and categorically denies the validity of any effort by medieval writers or intellectuals to come to terms with this phenomenon. Then we would have to accuse both Voltaire and Lessing of the same bigotry, and we would be left with nothing but shreds of failed attempts ever to build bridges over the abysses separating different religions and cultures. If that were true, then the medieval Crusades would have to be seen in the same category as the terrorist attack of 9/11—truly an absurd approach and a cynical interpretation of human history in the darkest possible colors.

Wolfram von Eschenbach

One most intriguing voice proves to be the German courtly poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, who treated a number of times the problematic, mostly hostile relationships between Christians and Muslims, yet projected remarkably innovative approaches for his time. Here disregarding the most bloody war epic *Willehalm* (ca. 1220), let us pay close attention to his *Parzival* (ca. 1205), in which the protagonist searches, ultimately successfully, for the Holy Grail. More or less after his decisive inner learning process has been accomplished,

especially with the help of his uncle Trevrizent, one morning Parzival encounters a strange knight who is half black and half white. He does not know for a long time that this is his half-brother Feirefiz, the son of Gahmuret and the black queen Belacane.²⁷ Although there is no word about the religious difference, Feirefiz simply represents the East, the Orient, hence also the non-Christian world, as he is later baptized and only then is able to perceive the Grail itself.

Already his mother had been presented as an idealized, beautiful black lady, whom Parzival's father Gahmuret at first, in his ignorance, had initially viewed with disgust, until he suddenly fell in love with her. Their relationship seems to have run smoothly and was completely harmonious, except that Gahmuret later abandons her because he thirsts so much for knighthood and manly combat. He does not truly object to her being black, and only pretends that their religious difference might matter, whereas in reality he only wants to enjoy his freedom and throw himself into new jousts, disregarding his commitment to his wife, as he later does with his Christian wife Herzeloide as well. His excessive obsession with knighthood, however, then also leads to his early death and Parzival's problematic, fatherless childhood. The religious conflict only serves as a pretext, while the true problem discussed by Wolfram consists of excessive desire for manliness and male identity in a world strongly determined by women.²⁸

Now, near the conclusion of the romance, Feirefiz and Parzival engage in a deadly joust when they encounter each other, at the end of which Parzival's sword suddenly breaks as a sign of God's wish that brothers do not fight against each other, at which point Feirefiz voluntarily terminates the fight, demonstrating magnanimity and a noble heart, although he is a heathen. The two knights had gained most of their own strength from reflecting on their beloved (Feirefiz) and wife (Parzival) respectively, but God, as the narrator underscores, objected to the two half-brothers killing each other. Feirefiz goes so far as to admit that Parzival would have probably defeated him, if his sword had not broken (p. 311), and asks his opponent to reveal his name. Most significantly, Feirefiz throws his own sword away to allow both to be on equal footing; soon enough both realize that they are related in blood, so they seal their new friendship with a kiss, building a new, unheard-of bridge between a Christian and a Muslim (if that is what we could identify Feirefiz as).

As scholarship has consistently observed, the figure of Feirefiz appears somewhat overdrawn in every respect, since he is wealthier, more powerful, more anxious to meet women, more eager to see the Grail, even if it requires his baptism, than virtually everyone else.²⁹ Nevertheless, this is not only a reflection of Wolfram's inimical satire and irony, but it also reveals how much he tried to overcome traditional enmity between the world of the East and the world of the West, inciting laughter over the ponderous ritual of baptism in order to enjoy love. But first, we are told how the Muslim is welcomed and integrated into courtly society. After having retrieved Feirefiz's sword, Parzival and his half-brother ride together to King Arthur: "Wrathful enmity was shunned by both of them then, and companionably they rode off" (p. 315). No one ever voices any suspicion or fear of the newcomer, and no one is really concerned about him belonging to another religion. Of course, with Feirefiz's conversion to Christianity, with his later return home to his Oriental country, and with his establishment of a Christian empire there to be subsequently ruled by his son Prester John (p. 344), who became a common myth in all of medieval Europe, the efforts to inject a sense of tolerance into the narrative comes to a close.³⁰

Nevertheless, Wolfram offers several new perspectives that matter for us most. First, with the presentation of the new personal relationship between Feirefiz and Parzival he indicates that both sides of the cultural and religious divide, East and West, were actually members of the same universal family. Second, the traditional religious conflict is here simply subsumed under the ideal of erotic love. Feirefiz does not really care about the principles of Christianity (or his own religion, for that matter); instead he agrees to the baptism so that he can marry the guardian of the Grail, Repanse de Schoye, although his declaration

of his new faith sounds more than dubious: “If it helps me against distress, I’ll believe all that you command” (pp. 342–43). Laughter regularly erupts over this hilarious character, who by his actions and words undermines, unwillingly, their own seriousness with regard to their Christian faith.³¹ Feirefiz, however, can be identified as a realistically portrayed figure, dedicated to knightly prowess, the passion of love, and the joys of chivalry, little concerned with spiritual or theological issues and completely unaware of racial or cultural problems and differences. As seriously as Wolfram had developed his entire romance, here, at the last scene on castle Munsalvaesche, religion as an identity marker is devalued and literally laughed at, although Christianity as such still receives highest respect.³²

Late-medieval philosophers and tolerance: Ramon Llull and Nicholas of Cusa

If we next turned to philosophical writings from the Middle Ages in which nascent ideas of tolerance and hence acceptance of representatives of other religions can be discovered, we would have to examine the treatises by such intellectual giants as Peter Abelard (d. 1142) or Gilbert Crispin (ca. 1055–1117). The former composed the most intriguing *Dialogus inter philosophum, Judaeum, et Christianum* (ca. 1130), while the latter published his *Disputatio Judei et Christiani* and the *Disputatio cum gentili* (ca. 1092–1093).³³ These and other treatises proved to be highly popular, as we can tell on the basis of the rich manuscript tradition, but scholarship has not yet agreed on how to evaluate those works with respect to the idea of tolerance/toleration. Do they reflect sincere efforts to reach out to the other, non-Christian community (Jews and Muslims), or do they only pretend to practice toleration, and in reality assume *a priori* that the Christian faith is the only true one and that hence the purpose consisted only of pretending openness and mutual sympathy, while in reality the opponent was to be exposed and ridiculed, finally to be converted or subjugated?³⁴

But every exchange among representatives of individual religions is driven by the desire to convince the other of the superiority or correctness of the own position. Every scholarly debate hinges on that assumption. What matters, by contrast, is the very willingness to engage in that critical exchange and to accept in that process the other side as an equal partner in an intellectual debate. The Majorcan theologian, philosopher, poet, and linguist Ramon Llull (1232–1316) provided an excellent example for this intriguing and far-reaching process that started in the late Middle Ages—certainly very tentatively, yet quite explicitly—and continues until today.³⁵ In his *Book of the Gentile* Llull pursues a highly unusual perspective, reaching out to the representatives of the other world religions, and inviting them to a rational debate in which no side was to be treated unequally.

Mutual respect and recognition of inalienable rights for each one of them undergird the entire treatise, in which a Gentile encounters three wise men, identified as a Jew, a Christian, and a Saracen, hence a Muslim.³⁶ Their exchanges and presentations of the essential tenets of their individual beliefs constitute this famous text. It begins, however, with the first book where the narrator proves that God exists. In the second book the Jew argues that his belief is better than those of the Christian and the Saracen. The Christian follows next, presenting his position regarding that fundamental question, and this with precisely the same approach as the one pursued by the Jew. Finally, the Saracen has his turn, who expresses the same opinion regarding Islam, as to be expected.

The fact itself that the Gentile carefully listens to all three men in a polite and attentive manner already demonstrates that a “tolerant” attitude permeates this text. Significantly, the Saracen is quoted as affirming that even among his fellow-religionists there are many different opinions concerning Paradise and the proper interpretation of the Koran, indicating thereby that religion is a matter of faith. He concludes his presentation with “salutation[s] according to his custom” to the other two wise men, acknowledging their rank and degree

of learning, without rejecting them out of any religious fanaticism. Most importantly, the Jew, the Christian, and the Saracen are all identified as wise men and worthy of respect.

Consequently, the Gentile stands up and expresses his newly found, deep conviction of the existence of God. He does not convert to Christianity, but voices only his understanding of the divine cosmos to which he belongs as well as God's creature (pp. 294–295). Significantly, he does not talk about the true Christian God, or of the God of the New Testament, as we would expect to hear in a debate treatise by a medieval Christian writer. Instead he addresses God as the incarnation of all justice: “Do not let us forget justice in our prayer, for divine justice knows all my faults and can rightly punish me for all my failings. Whatever divine justice does with me, whether it punishes me and condemns me to everlasting torment, or pardons me to everlasting blessing, in every way I worship and bless God's justice” (p. 296). Subsequently he also adds the values of prudence, fortitude, temperance, abstinence, patience, and perseverance as the bulwark against all the seven vices, very much in the vein of all medieval philosophers and theologians.

Most astonishingly, just when the Gentile is about to pronounce, in the presence of two other Gentiles who happen to approach the group, which religion he now would declare to be the only true one, the three wise men depart because, as they explain, “in order for each to be free to choose his own religion, they preferred not knowing which religion he would choose” (p. 300). They have recognized, as they underscore, that faith is a highly personal matter, while religion can be discussed from many different perspectives, which represents philosophers' greatest delight: “. . . if, in front of us, you state which religion it is that you prefer, then we would not have such a good subject of discussion nor such satisfaction in discovering the truth” (p. 301).

Nevertheless, one unnamed wise man affirms that they all recognize that they have “one faith, one religion, one sect, one manner of loving and honoring God, and we should love and help one another, and make it so that between us there be no difference or contrariety of faith or custom, which difference and contrariety cause us to be enemies with one another and to be at war, killing one another and falling captive to one another” (pp. 301–02). Another wise man points out how much each person clings to the faith which s/he has received from the parents and ancestors (p. 302), while the third openly laments people's frailty, their love for temporal goods, and that they are lukewarm and inconsistent in their love for God. For him this means that “because we do not prepare ourselves to receive God's virtue and blessing, nor to be his valiant servants who praise him, strengthened by stout hearts to face any hardship to exalt His honor, God therefore does not bestow on us that virtue which must be present in those who, through God's virtue, would destroy the error of people on the road to damnation who think they are on the road to salvation” (p. 303).

Even though we might be tempted to identify each one of the three wise men with one of the world religions, Lull denies us that opportunity, especially because he has them leave that place, although not before having expressed great respect to each other, which signifies that, at least in the narrator's eyes, all three world religions are to be treated as equal and worthy of further discussion. Nevertheless, they all agree that the final goal for mankind should be to have “only one faith, one religion” (p. 303). The problem all people face, however, rests in the constant presence of “war, turmoil, ill will, injury, and shame” (p. 303). They, by contrast, insist, which represents the very model of tolerance in past and present, that they need to meet again and continue with their discussions until they achieve the goal of identifying the one true faith (p. 303).³⁷ Most significantly, however, and this deserves to be repeated here, neither the Gentile nor the three wise men ever formulate in their conclusions what that faith would be, almost suggesting that it would be one new faith far beyond the traditional limits of the old world religions, holding out a beacon of hope for their own time and the future, hence for us as well.

Many other voices could and should be listened to in our context, such as Honorat Bovet (ca. 1345–ca. 1410) with his debate narrative *Apparicion maistre Jehan de Meun*,³⁸ but let us conclude with a brief analysis of Bishop Nicholas of Cusa's (Cusanus) important comments on this central issue, voiced in the late fifteenth century. With the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans, Christian Europeans felt a deep sense of existential threat, which continued well into the eighteenth century. Cusanus (1401–1464) responded to that monumental event by writing his famous treatise *De pace fidei* (September of 1453). In 1461 he turned his full attention to the Qur'an, in which he tried to find common elements shared by the Christians as well, as expressed in his *Cribratio Alkorani*.³⁹ We can observe a remarkable difference between both works, the former expressing a much more open-minded attitude, while the latter is determined by considerable polemics against Islam.

Very similar to and certainly influenced by Llull, Cusanus hoped for the establishment of universal peace anchored in one all-encompassing faith. It goes without saying that for him, like for everyone else in medieval and early-modern Europe, this only meant the global return or the rediscovery of the biblical text and the rule of Christianity in a peaceful and harmonious manner. In *De pace fidei*, for instance, we read: "But all men who believe that the Kingdom of Heaven exists maintain the contrary position; for they all confess that some holy men in their own respective sect have obtained happiness. Therefore, everyone's faith . . . presupposes that Christ died and ascended into Heaven."⁴⁰

As to the Qur'an, Cusanus reached the conclusion that irrespective of some incoherences and errors resulting from human weakness in composing that book, it can be used even by Christians as God's self-manifestation. Major differences to the Old and the New Testament only appear so to the unlearned and ignorant, while the pious interpretation would reveal the Qur'an's sacred nature. Ironically, however, for Cusanus then this text would have to be viewed only as a medium for the additional confirmation of the truth of the Bible.⁴¹

Of course, true tolerance does not emerge here at all, though Cusanus's attempts to establish an intellectual system of toleration clearly comes to the fore, which proves to be very far-reaching and integrative for his time, as famous philosopher Ernst Cassirer affirmed already in his *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*.⁴² Cary Nederman qualifies this from a comparative perspective, emphasizing, "At best, then, what distinguishes *De pace fidei*'s idea of religious pluralism is its Irenicism; violent persecution and coerced conversation must be replaced with rational debate and proof as the means for realizing the universal truth of Christian doctrine."⁴³ As much as Cusanus argued for the plain and absolute truth of the Christian faith, he was also willing to accept the vast latitude of different rites and customs all over the world. So, to quote Nederman again, "Nicholas teaches that acceptance of the impossibility of eliminating group difference can lead to tolerant attitudes."⁴⁴

Among many other people from all over the world, Cusanus has an Arab speak with the allegorized Word about the absolute truth of human life, and the former confirms that "all men by nature desire Wisdom. For Wisdom is the life of the intellect, which cannot be sustained in its own vitality by any other food than by truth and by the Word of life" (p. 40). Since there is agreement as to the ultimate existence of absolute Wisdom, this is equated with God, so they both reach the mutually shared conclusion that "there is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of the rites" (p. 40). Very much in the way that Boethius had already explained the origin of all that is good and can be equated with God in his *De consolazione philosophiae* (p. 525), the two speakers comprehend that there can only be one source of all being, which is God. Essentially, for Cusanus all tensions and conflicts among the world religions can be overcome if we all recognize the almost necessary differences in rites and customs, while the basic faith in one God as the creator of everything could be easily shared by everyone.

In more practical terms this ultimately leads to the realization, as we learn from a Syrian, that love as the most fundamental force governs the world, which every religionist could easily understand and embrace: “Love unites. Hence, this spirit, whose power is diffused throughout the universe, can be said to be Love-that-is-God. Consequently, the union by which the parts are united into one, or into the totality—without which [union] there would be no perfection—has God as its Beginning” (p. 48). Universally, there is supposed to be a spirit that will reunite with the everlasting life after death (p. 55), which logically reduces differences among the various religions to matters of ritual and ceremony. Of course, Cusanus always returns to Christ as God’s manifestation here on earth and demands from all contributors to the debate to accept Him as the Savior (p. 65).

The conclusion of *De pace fidei* consists in the collective realization, resulting from the debate and then a careful study of learned books in all languages, that every human being should, or must, believe in the one single God: “After these [writings] were examined, it was ascertained that the entire diversity [among the religions] lay in the rites rather than in the worship of one God” (p. 70). For Cusanus, reason represents the critical medium to overcome all differences and to establish world peace. Of course, we could not, from our perspective, identify this Irenicism as the decisive platform for late-medieval or Renaissance tolerance.

The analysis of Cusanus’s *Cribratio Alkorani* would reveal even further how much he predicated his entire discourse on the assumption that the Christian faith was self-evident and only needed to be fully understood in a rational manner to make everyone convinced of its absolute truth. But as much as Wolfram von Eschenbach and Giovanni Boccaccio, from their literary perspective, already projected the possibility of people of very different faith, language, and culture to come together in harmony, perceiving themselves as members of one and the same family, as much we can recognize in Cusanus a fifteenth-century intellectual who harbored strong hope in the power of communication and critical examination of religion. Certainly, the supremacy of Christianity is never questioned, and all other people are supposed to submit under the conclusive realization of the complete truth of that religion. Nevertheless, and that is the important result of our discussion, the fact by itself that communication was sought after and that differences in rite and customs would not really matter for either side constituted the basis for tenuous, fragile, but certainly budding features of tolerance. Whether we have fully reached the end stage of that long-term process, embracing tolerance with our whole being and mind, remains a critical question for the future.

Contacts between east and west in the Middle Ages: Some concluding reflections

The numerous examples from the Middle Ages, both literary and religious, political and philosophical, indicating an ongoing process of engaging the other religions in debates, obviously in the hope of converting them, clearly signal that the efforts to establish communications across cultural, linguistic, and religious divides enjoyed a long tradition harking back to at least the twelfth century, while the prior period was too determined by the Crusades to grant any room for peaceful contacts and efforts to learn something about the other cultures and religions. There is no doubt that the path from these late-medieval projects to open passages across the religious borders to efforts in the Enlightenment and until today were narrow and tenuous at best. Nevertheless, those efforts existed, even though the authors of those romances and treatises had probably not had many or any real contacts with representatives of Islam.

However, as we learn from these examples, human life can only be preserved ultimately if differences in faith, for instance, are accepted as the foundations of all existence. As both Boccaccio and Lessing long after him have confirmed, no one can really distinguish among

the three rings, although everyone adamantly believes that the father handed out the right one to his beloved son. We can fight over the authenticity of religion, debate over one reading over the other, and we can, unfortunately wage wars in the name of a God, but we can never prove or verify the truth of a religion in scientific or logical terms. Faith is individual, subjective, a matter of personal choice. Unfortunately, until today just too many people have died as victims in an ongoing war not so much against other religions, but against the threat of rationality in a seemingly irrational world. As Anthony O'Mahony astutely observes, "There is an intimacy to the Christian-Muslim encounters, which offers a familiarity, but allows for little theological commonality due to difference. Thus throughout the centuries since the rise of Islam, Muslim-Christian relations have revolved around this double axis of familiar, biblical appeal and strenuous, religious critique."⁴⁵

Moreover, as we learn from Emma Loosley, today, and pretty much throughout history, there were many forms of Christianity and of Islam. Her demand addressed to all religious groups deserves to be heeded very carefully: "Until Christians and Muslims can put aside mutual antagonism towards their co-religionists, it will be difficult to create movements that can significantly contribute to the Christian-Islamic dialogue process."⁴⁶ The force of love might, and certainly will, propel mankind forward, and promises to overcome even the deepest divide among the various religions.⁴⁷ However, one of the first stepping stones must be debate, must be the academic exchange, the learning from each other, and the comprehension of earlier attempts to reach out to the other and comprehend our differences and similarities. The past is by no means particularly pretty, but facing even the worst nightmares and horrors committed in previous periods promises the initiation of enlightened thought and critical exchange.

Without that important engagement, weapons and bombs will continue to speak their ugly and deadly language, droning out the whispering, though certainly irrepressible, choir of alternative voices representing all mankind.⁴⁸ Dialogue, however, cannot only aim for an understanding at the present time and perhaps in the future. Dialogue requires also a deep grasp of events in the past, of efforts in previous times to overcome hostile tensions by way of meaningful and trusting communication.⁴⁹ Antagonisms of old and of the present are easy tools in the hands of fanatics and irrational supporters of violence as the only means to establish and protect their own identity. As the evidence brought forth in this paper indicates, however, there is a long history of resorting to more intellectual strategies, more worthy of a dignified humanity. Certainly, neither Wolfram von Eschenbach nor Nicholas of Cusa, for instance, achieved the desired or dreamed-of break-through, but they were powerful, though isolated, voices at their time exploring alternative routes and blazing paths toward a better understanding of the other side in this global conflict between Islam and Christianity.

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NOTES

- 1 The relationship between Jews and Christians throughout the Middle Ages has been one of great conflicts, as a rich body of scholarship has confirmed. However, Jews and Christians more often than not enjoyed some form of peaceful cohabitation, especially in earlier times, while tensions grew in noticeable degree by the fourteenth century. See now Thomas F. Glick, 2010, pp. 10–43.
- 2 See, for instance, *Mediating Faiths*, 2011; Jane Idleman Smith, *Muslims, Christians*, 2007).
- 3 Laura Elizabeth Provencher, "A Critical Analysis," M.A. thesis, Tucson, University of Arizona 2010. One of her conclusions consists of the following observation: "It examines the writings and speeches of nine recent and contemporary Muslim intellectual-activists scholars. This analysis reveals a fragmented discourse, which

- is generally supportive of IFD, and indicates limits to the religious legitimization of IFD during Christian-Muslim hostilities" (cited from the online version: <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/193449>, last accessed on Feb. 23, 2012).
- 4 Some of the seminal studies in this field were published by Richard W. Southern, *Western Views*, 1982; François Berriot, "Remarques," 1986, pp. 11–25. See also the contributions to *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, 1996.
 - 5 *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, 2007; *Muslim and Christian Understanding*, 2010; 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Muhsin Turki, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 2010; Máire Byrne, *The Names of God*, 2011; *Learned Ignorance*, 2011.
 - 6 For an excellent selection of relevant texts, see Heinrich Schmidinger, ed., *Wege zur Toleranz*, 2002. For a concrete case study, see Maher Y. Abu-Munshar, *Islamic Jerusalem*, 2007.
 - 7 Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, 2000. The text appeared in London, printed for Fielding and Walker, 1779. For research on violence in the premodern world, see the contributions to *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature*, 2004.
 - 8 Here quoted from the online version: http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/quickSearch.do?now=1329774296210&inPS=true&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=uarizona_main (last accessed on Feb. 20, 2012).
 - 9 See, for instance, the contributions to *Aufgeklärte Zeiten?*, 2011; Jost Schneider, "Toleranz und Alterität," 2005.
 - 10 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*, 2003; see also *Nathan the Wise (Nathan der Weise)*, trans. [1950].
 - 11 Klaus Ley, "Die Ringparabel," 2006; Thomas Möbius, *Textanalyse*, 2011.
 - 12 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1930, 1970, p. 61.
 - 13 For a most welcome differentiating perspective on the Middle Ages, see Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, 2000.
 - 14 Again, there is a huge body of relevant scholarship on this topic; see, for instance, Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 2007, 87–116; Robert Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom*, 2006; Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews*, 1995.
 - 15 *Les Cathares en Occitanie*, ed. Robert Lafont, 1982; Michel Roquebert, *Die Geschichte der Katharer*, 1999, 2012.
 - 16 Peter Dinzelbacher, *Bernhard von Clairvaux*, 1998, pp. 265–69.
 - 17 O. Lellek, "Toleranz," 1996, pp. 849–50; for a more detailed discussion from a theological perspective, see Eckehart Stöve, "Toleranz: Kirchengeschichtlich," 2002, pp. 646–63.
 - 18 Mark R. Cohen, "The 'Convivencia'," 2009, pp. 54–65.
 - 19 See the contributions to *Cultural Diversity and Islam*, 2003; cf. Aaron Tyler, *Islam, the West, and Tolerance*, 2008; Michael Radu, *Europe's Ghost*, 2009.
 - 20 This topic has been studied already from many different perspectives; see Ron Barkai, *Cristianos y musulmanes*, 1984, 1991, cf. the contributions to *In the Light of Medieval Spain*, 2008.
 - 21 *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 1829, 2004. See also *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 1986, 2005.
 - 22 *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness*, 2012. This is a marvelous collection of Arabic/Jewish reports on contacts with Vikings and Germanic people.
 - 23 For a good introduction, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usama_ibn_Munqidh (last accessed on Feb. 22, 2012). For an English translation, see Usama Ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation*, 2008.
 - 24 Albrecht Classen, "Travel Space," 2010, pp. 375–88. For a solid edition with a translation into German, see *Rom – Jerusalem – Santiago*, 2007.
 - 25 Albrecht Classen, "Tolerance in the Middle Ages?," 2006, pp. 283–223.
 - 26 Jerold C. Frakes, *Vernacular and Latin Literary Discourses*, 2011, p. xiii.
 - 27 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival and Titurel*, 2004, 2006. For an anthology of relevant texts in medieval German literature with references to Blacks, see Andreas Mielke, *Nigra sum*, 1992. For a broader survey, see François de Medeiros, *L'Occident et l'Afrique*, 1985.
 - 28 Martin-M. Langner, "Verletzlichkeit des ritterlichen Mannes," 2011, pp. 15–42; Christa Agnes Tuczay, "Helt und Kühner Degen," 2011, pp. 43–65.
 - 29 Elke Brüggem and Joachim Bumke, "Figuren-Lexikon," 2011, pp. 867–69.
 - 30 Jerold C. Frakes, *Vernacular and Latin Literary Discourses*, pp. 76–95, offers a fascinating although ultimately misguided interpretation of Wolfram's perception of "the Other," insofar as he allows his certainly correct reading of the bloody military epic poem *Willehalm* to color his entire analysis, which does serious injustice particularly to *Parzival*.
 - 31 See the contributions to *Laughter in the Middle Ages*, 2010.
 - 32 Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the question of how Wolfram projected the Orient; see the bibliography in *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Ein Handbuch*, vol. II, pp. 1101–03 (ten major studies).
 - 33 Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, pp. 25–37.
 - 34 This negative evaluation is the tenor in the study by Marcel Müllerburg, Britta Müller-Schauenburg, and Henrik Wels, "'Und warum glaubst du dann nicht?'" 2011, pp. 261–324. As the title of their investigation implies, they suggest that the basis upon which these dialogues are built consists of an ambivalent approach

- to rationality because Christianity simply must win here. As my analysis of Llull's work will show, this is not necessarily the only and logical consequence in reading these treatises. As to the consistent efforts by many representatives of both sides of the cultural and religious divide to ridicule and humiliate the other, see Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, pp. 87–116.
- 35 See, for example, Juan R. I. Cole, *Comparing Muslim Societies*, 1992; *Contacts and Controversies*, 2010.
- 36 *Selected Works of Ramon Llull*, 1985.
- 37 Albrecht Classen, "Toleranz im späten 13. Jahrhundert," 2004, pp. 25–55. See also the contributions to *Ramon Llull und Nikolaus von Kues*, 2005.
- 38 *Medieval Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Dialogue*, 2005.
- 39 Morimichi Watanabe, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 2011, pp. 51–57.
- 40 Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, 1990, p. 60, or XIV, 49. See also Hopkins's insightful analysis of this dilemmatic approach, pp. 3–13.
- 41 Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei*, p. 24.
- 42 Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos*, 1927, p. 31.
- 43 Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, p. 88.
- 44 Nederman, *Worlds of Difference*, p. 96. James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond confirm that with Cusanus's text a new threshold had been crossed since "[a] new intellectual and social cosmos was in the making and the religious need of the time was to maintain a plausible unity amid increasing diversity and discovery." Nicholas of Cusa, *On Interreligious Harmony*, 1990, p. xxxi.
- 45 Anthony O'Mahony, "Christianity and Islam," 2008, pp. 2–3.
- 46 Emma Loosely, "Christianity and Islam," p. 242.
- 47 See the contributions to *A Common Word*, 2010.
- 48 For Islamic perspectives, see the contributions to *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, 2007.
- 49 See the contributions to *Muslim-Christian Perceptions of Dialogue Today*, 2000.

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