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JOHANNES THEUNISZ AND ʿABD AL-ʿAZĪZ:
A FRIENDSHIP IN ARABIC STUDIES IN
AMSTERDAM, 1609-16101

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Abstract
In the winter of 1609-1610, the Moroccan diplomat ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Muhammad spent four months in the home of the Mennonite Hebraist and Arabist Jan Theunisz in Amsterdam. The written reflections of their discussions on religion and everyday matters present an extraordinary example of the shifting attitude towards Islam in the seventeenth century: a development from medieval rejection of Islam as ridiculous to a historicizing assessment of Islam in the early stages of the Enlightenment. The two men developed a remarkable cooperation in the study of Arabic, a language for which around 1610 no textbooks were available. Theunisz’ record of their conversations and a glossary which he compiled during these conversations are here for the first time subjected to an analysis which teases out the content and nature of their exchange in the context of early seventeenth-century contact between Christendom and Islam in Western Europe.

Key words: Arabic studies – Amsterdam – Johannes Theunisz – interreligious communication – Christendom and Islam

In the seventeenth century, attitudes towards the Arabic world and Islam were slowly shifting, in the Dutch Republic as well as in other western European countries2. Two extremes of these attitudes can be found for instance in the preface of André DuRyer’s French translation of the Quran (1647), in which he betrays the extent to which his notion of Islam was based upon medieval ideas about the abject and ridiculous, illogical religion of the false prophet, and in Adriaan Reland’s De Religione Mohammedica (1705), in which the author corrected centuries-old misunderstandings about Islam and considered the religion as the alluringly logical

1 I am grateful to dr Arnoud Vrolijk and prof. dr Gerard Wiegers for their reading of an early version of this article, to dr Theo Dinkelgrin and the anonymous reviewers for most helpful comments on a late version, to prof. dr Petra Sijpsteijn for checking the transcriptions of Arabic quotes, and to Theo Schulten for the same work with regard to the Latin quotes.

truth of a different culture. In approaching religion as part of the cultural heritage of a society, Reland broke new ground.\(^3\)

Scholars have identified various motives and conditions for such shifts. On the one hand, they are related to a rapprochement between European countries and the Muslim world for political and mercantile reasons.\(^4\) On the other, the humanist, philological studies of Arabic and other eastern languages that had been initiated by theologians to develop their (polemical) understanding of Church history and Christian history at large, yielded more objective knowledge as well. As Jan Loop remarked about one of the famous Arabists of the time, ‘in the wake of apologetic and polemical objectives, factual knowledge of Islam was generated and disseminated in ever more refined ways – albeit frequently unintended and contingent.’\(^5\) A third factor that may have contributed to a more open, less biased attitude towards Islam lies in the personal contacts between individual Christian Europeans and Muslims from the Maghreb and the Middle East, who came to cooperate in one field or other.\(^6\) An example of this is expounded on in this short study of the cooperation and friendship between the Moroccan diplomat 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Muḥammad al-Thālabī and Jan Theunisz (Johannes Antonides, 1569-between 1635 and 1640), Hebraist, Arabist, printer, distiller, innkeeper and more, which flourished in the winter of 1609-1610. Although this friendship precedes DuRyer in time, by four decades even, its character places

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\(^4\) Mercantile and political motives are emphasised e.g. in R. Bertrand, ‘The Making of a “Malay text”. Peter Floris, Erpenius and Textual Transmission in and out of the Malay World at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century’, *Quaderni Storici*, vol. 48, 2013, pp. 141-165.


Theunisz’s view of Islam in a position in between that of DuRyer and Reland, and also between learned and more amateur ideas.

Recently, and in part inspired by Natalie Zemon-Davis’ representation of Leo Africanus, a growing number of studies have appeared that focus on individuals from the Maghrib and the Ottoman empire in Europe in the seventeenth century. All of these figures left letters, travel reports and other traces that enable these studies. Examples are the originally Andalusian Ahmad ibn Qāsim al-Ḥajarī, the Greek orthodox Syrian Niqūlāwus ibn Buṭrus, Elias of Babylon, and the various writers of letters to the Leiden professors Jacob Golius (1596-1667) and Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624). These studies give us a deeper understanding, less dependent on European sources, of the world in which their subjects traveled, and of the relations and values which developed in their time. However, as much as we would like to follow the example of such studies, we cannot focus on ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in the same way, because no letters or other personal documents from him have, as yet, been found. Almost all we have are Theunisz’ reflections on some of their conversations and on some of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’ opinions in an untitled work to which I will refer as *Conversations*. Of course that tells us more about Theunisz than about ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. But the glimpses we do get of the latter draw our attention to the nature of the exchanges between the two men, and to oscillations between judgement and openness, religious certainty and modern searching, in an environment less academic than that of other European Arabists of the time.

Theunisz was a talented man from a humble background, a Mennonite with a knack for learning languages, who tried to be appointed as lecturer in Arabic

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8 In catalogues the book which I call *Conversations* is referred to as ‘over den Christelijken godsdienst en den Quran’, ‘about the Christian religion and the Quran’. Theunisz presented the manuscript to curators of the University of Leiden, probably in 1610. At some point, it disappeared from the university library (I have not been able to find out when), for it is now kept at the Regionaal Archief Leiden en Omstreken (shelfmark lb 69501).
at the University of Leiden around 1610. Apart from a short appointment, however, and in spite of his admirable production of translations and teaching materials, he remained an outsider to the University. His successors in Leiden were rather negligent regarding his contributions and his books, and they soon forgot his name. Theunisz himself had been very generous in describing the importance of people who contributed to his knowledge of the Arabic language, most of all his teacher Ābd al-Āzīz. He wrote about him and about their dialogues on religion not only in his book Conversations, but also in letters he addressed to the University’s curators, and in the preface to another booklet he offered them, in which he mentioned ‘Ābd al-Āzīz’ together with the highly respected Leiden professors Rudolph Snellius and Franciscus Raphelengius, and explained the value of his instruction in detail.10

From Marrakesh to Amsterdam

The story of Theunisz and Ābd al-Āzīz is set in Amsterdam, and it can begin with the sultan in Marrakesh, Mulay Zaydān (r. 1608-1627). This sultan had been troubled by attacks on his authority by the rebel and Sufi leader Ābū Maḥallī, by one of his brothers and by the Spanish king. He wished to improve the trade relations with the Dutch Republic, in which he also hoped to find a military ally against Spain. In 1609 (the Republic had just signed a twelve year cease-fire treaty with Spain) he sent a diplomatic mission to stadtholder Maurice of Nassau, which was led by the ambassador Hammu b. Bashīr. Ābd al-Āzīz


10 See the preface, addressed to curators, in Theunisz’ Doctissimorum quorundam hominum de Arabicae linguae antiquitate dignitate et utilitate testimonia publica, Amsterdam: Amstel, 1611 (Leiden University Library, shelfmark Or. 14.314) and compare Theunisz’ acknowledgement of Ābd al-Āzīz with Erpenius’ description of the erudite Ahmad b. Qāsim al-Ḥajarī as ‘a certain merchant’ who knew less than he did of the Arabic grammar (A. Vrolijk, ‘The Prince of Arabists and his Many Errors: Thomas Erpenius’s Image of Joseph Scaliger and the Edition of the Proverbia Arabica (1614)’, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, vol. 73, 2010, pp. 297-325 (316), or with Sebastian Tengnagel, who did not mention the name of Darwīsh Ibrāhīm al-Shī‘ī (who copied some important manuscripts for him; see Jones, Learning Arabic (as in n. 2), pp. 74-94), or with Ravius’ qualifications of Niqūlāwus ibn Buṭrus as ‘my Arab’ and ‘a weaver’, in Kilpatrick and Toomer, ‘Niqūlāwus al-Ḥalabī’ (as in n. 7), p. 9.
b. Muḥammad al-Thālabī took part as pupil of or as a secretary to the head of the delegation (ṭālib al-qāʿīd, translated by Theunisz as secretarius), as Theunisz noted in a margin of the report of their conversations.

One day in December, soon after the delegation’s arrival in Amsterdam, Ābd al-Āzīz, a tall man with a dark face and ‘curious clothes’ was walking down a street there. He must have been surprised when someone addressed him, in words that he understood. This was Theunisz, who asked him in Arabic where he came from. Theunisz later regarded the meeting as one of the most wonderful meetings in his life, one that had occurred ‘not without divine intervention’.

Jan Theunisz had been born in the city of Alkmaar, where he first worked as a thread-twister before he started to learn Latin, when he was already twenty, in order to deepen his understanding of the Bible. Four years later, he moved to Leiden to expand his studies of ‘other languages than his mother tongue’. He registered at the University, studied Hebrew with Rudolph Snellius (1546-1613; he taught mathematics and philosophy primarily) and then Arabic with Franciscus I Raphelengius (Frans van Ravelingen, 1539-1597), the man who also directed the Leiden branch of the printing and editing house of his father-in-law, Christopher Plantin. Theunisz even learned some Ethiopic. As many students did, Theunisz also lived for some time in the house of his professors.

Later, he established himself as a printer in Leiden, and printed news bulletins and religious songs, among other things, in Dutch, Latin and Hebrew. With permission of the States General, he also gave private lessons in Hebrew. It could not, however, provide him with enough income, so he moved to Amsterdam in 1604. There he tried again as a printer, and also ran a small bookshop not far from the Zuiderkerk. Meanwhile, he did what he could to quench his intellectual thirst – or rather to use his talents by way of religious duty, as he saw it.

11 In Conversations (as in n. 8), p. 13, Theunisz writes: ‘fa-idh wajadtu fi tariqin rajulan ṭawilan wajhahu ukhalan walibasahu ājaban li āynāni.; Ecce enim reperi [sic, for repperi] in via hominem quendam longum statura facies eius erat (sub)nigra vestimentum ipsius mirabile aspectu.’

12 In Conversations, p. 13, Theunisz writes: ‘fa-in kāna lī ājabtu alayhā; accidit (inquam) mihi (res quaedam) miratus sum in ea’ (Note how the Latin translation is intended to explain the syntax of the Arabic phrase.) In the preface to Doctissimorum ... testimonia (as in n. 10), he notes about the meeting: ‘Non sine divina dispositione incidi in Arabem quendam à Sultano Moroco legati secretarium, nomine Abdil Aziz, à quo, aedibus meis hospitio excepto, quae adhuc restabant ad pleniorem linguae intelligentiam, percepí omnia.’


14 NNBW, vol. 9, col. 1118.

15 Conversations, p. 10 and the letters mentioned in note 19.
translated and printed, for instance, a Dutch text into Hebrew (by the English theologian Hugh Broughton, ‘Antwoort op een Hebreuschen brief van een Jode, begeerichlijk vereischende onderwijs des Christen geloofs’), and organized a public debate about it. He also exchanged knowledge about eastern languages with a group of friends. In the circle of his friends, we find such resourceful characters as Dionysius Vossius (son of the famous polymath Gerard Johannes Vossius), the English Presbyterian vicar John Paget and his compatriot Matthew Slade (once a Brownist, then a Calvinist and rector of the Latin School in Amsterdam) who shared the humanist interest in the study of the Scripture in the original languages and in the study of eastern languages. Arabic, although not an original language of the Bible, interested them because it shed light on terms or passages that raised questions in Hebrew or Aramaic. Slade owned a copy of two classic printed Arabic grammars, *al-Kāfiyya* and *al-Ājurrūmiyya*. The copies are still extant: in the margins there are some notes by Theunisz.16 Young Vossius, Paget and Theunisz also shared some of the most non-conformist positions within Protestantism, for which the Englishman had been forced to abandon his home. In the Netherlands non-Calvinist Protestants were by that time allowed to congregate privately, although they were banned from government office – and Mennonites usually shunned such positions too.17

Not Theunisz. When he ran into ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz at the age of forty, the meeting gave an extra impulse to his ambitions with regard to an appointment at the University of Leiden. Now concentrating on the Arabic language, he offered the curators his services to teach that language. They hesitated, possibly because these were years in which the University was plagued by the troubles (zwarigheden) caused by conflicts between Remonstrant and counter-Remonstrant theologians, and they were not keen on inviting a Mennonite. But after repeated letters, dedications and recommendations, they did appoint him on March 3, 1612.18

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16 Theunisz’ small but very clear handwriting is quite characteristic; see his handwritten notes in Ibn Ajurrum, *Kitāb al-Ajurrūmiyya fi-l-nawḥ*, Rome: Typographia Medicea, 1592 (Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM 063-4110).


18 See three undated letters from Theunisz to Curators in Leiden University Library, ms. *Archief van Curatoren 1574-1815*, ms. AC1 42/2. In one short and hastily (angrily?) written letter, he mentions his repeated ‘remonstrantien, tsi [sic, for ‘t zij] schriften, brieven, dedicatien, dankbaarheids-vereringen, attestatien en recommendatien bij schritte ofte monde.’ The decision to offer Theunisz a lectorship in Arabic was made on February 8, 1612 (P.C. Molhuysen, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis der Leidse Universiteit*, vol. 2, The Hague, 1916, p. 42; Leiden University Library, ms. AC1 20, fol. 324’), in the first curators’ meeting that was presided by the new rector for that
A year later, however, despite Theunisz’ considerable production of editions, translations and teaching materials in Arabic, he was dismissed in favour of the young and promising Thomas Erpenius. The decision was facilitated by earlier objections that Theunisz’ spoken Latin was poor and that he attracted few students.\textsuperscript{19}

After that – and after the death of his third wife and a new wedding – he devoted himself to selling brandy and running an inn in Amsterdam. At first, these may not have been happy days for him: he was once summoned before the municipal magistrates because of the annoyance he caused his neighbours by quarreling with his wife. But his existence as an innkeeper seems to have suited him well. In 1622 he bought the small inn in the Oudenbrugsteeg (now no. 23), called ‘De os in de bruyloft’ (The ox at the wedding), and three years later he added the house next door. He invited musicians and installed waterworks that turned the inn into a place of interest for city folk and foreigners.\textsuperscript{20} One of the latter described Theunisz at the end of his life as ‘a lusty old man, whose beard reacheth his girdle’.

\textsuperscript{21} ‘Abd al-Azīz, or Abdol Aziz, as Theunisz wrote initially, was from Barbary, as he told Theunisz on that cold day. Theunisz asked him – and apparently he could make himself understood – whether he would soon return there. ‘No’, was the answer, ‘not soon, because I do not want to travel by sea in winter.’\textsuperscript{22} Whereupon Theunisz invited the man to come and spend the winter at his house:

‘If it pleases God, he will do good by us.’ […] And that is what happened. He called me his friend, and I called him my friend, and God is our witness. He lived in my house and was to me like a son. I cared for him with the best food, and everything he needed for his daily life, while he instructed me in Arabic.\textsuperscript{23}
While the ambassador waited on the island of Texel for favourable winds to bring him back to Morocco, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz stayed with Theunisz for four months, until the second half of April 1610. During that period Theunisz learned more Arabic, he wrote, than he could have learned if he had spent even a year in Barbary himself. Like other contemporary Dutch students of Arabic, he had until then made his way into the language using books from the collections of Raphelengius and perhaps also of Joseph Scaliger, which contained various lexica, glossaries, Arabic translations of the Pentateuch and the Gospels, some copies of the Quran, and a work by Avicenna (on medicine). ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’ lessons and conversation were of a totally different quality. They were ‘live’. Most of all, he and Theunisz discussed religion, but sharing their daily life for so many weeks, they also talked about everyday topics.

The number and quality of presents that ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz left to friends in Amsterdam strongly suggest that for him too, his stay must have been an extraordinary and positive experience. Instead of finding isolation and loneliness in a city where nobody spoke his language, he was welcomed in a home and a small circle of friends, for whom he copied a number of books, in his trained hand: for Theunisz he made a copy of the prayer book by Muḥammad b. Muhammad al-Jazārī, Al-ḥiṣn al-ḥaṣin min kalām sayyid al-mursalīn, for ‘his friend John Paget’ (li-ṣadīqahu yūḥannā fājat) a copy of the Gospels in Arabic, fully vocalised and modestly decorated, and another copy of the Gospels for someone else. It would be hard to believe that he did all this purely out of a sense of duty or even gratitude towards his host, and without a good amount of enthusiasm inspired by the response of these men.

ka-ibnī wa-razaktu hu [sic, for razaqtuhu] bi-ṭā āmin fa-āṭaytu hu kullā shay’in li-ḥayāti fa-ammā huwa ṣallāmī; Si Deo placuerit fecerit nobis gratum, [...] et factum est ita, vocavitque me amicum suum et ego vocavi eum Amicum meum, Deus autem est nobis testis. Fuitque sic mecum in domo mea sicut filius meus. Alui eum cibo mundissimo, dedique ei omniamque ad vitam necessaria. Ille autem docuit me’. That Theunisz cared for his guest as for a ‘son’, suggests that ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was young. More about this possibility follows below.

24 Note that at this time, Theunisz did not yet have his inn. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was his guest in his own house.

25 Raphelengius gives a list of books he used as sources for his Dictionarium in its preface.

26 The prayer book is kept at Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM III A16. The book of the Gospels copied for Paget is kept at the Tresoar in Leeuwarden, shelfmark Hs 29. The dedication is on page 211. The pages are numbered in Theunisz’ hand. The copy was made from the Arabic edition by J.B. Raymundus, printed in Rome by the Typographia Medicea, now Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM KF 61-1022. We do not know for whom Abd al-ʿAziz made the second copy, but in his Conversations (p. 86) Theunisz mentions that he copied the Gospels twice.
Between a Muslim and a Christian
The click between Theunisz and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz appears first of all in the work the
dutchman presented as the reflection of their conversations ‘about the Christian
religion and the Quran’, which he offered in book-form to the University’s cura-
tors to convince them of his capacities in Arabic. The text on each left page is
in Arabic, with a translation in Latin on each right page. A literal translation:
giving evidence of a preoccupation with Arabic prepositions, is found in the
right margin, so that a student of Arabic might benefit from it. This presentation
of Arabic and translation on facing pages was in line with the lay-out of other
bilingual books, and would allow other students of Arabic to quickly assess
Theunisz’ grasp of the language. What immediately catches the eye too, is that
all text-blocks are written in the same frame (a double red line) that ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz
had used before, in his copy of the Gospels for Paget. Theunisz’ handwriting is
large (there are only twelve lines per page, later even only ten), but becomes
more firm by and by. The style of the handwriting is unmistakably influenced
by the Maghrebi style, with a pointed, arrow-like َٰdāl for instance, and a َٰkāf in
which a very short diagonal rests on the base of a very broad loop. ‘A neat hand’,
was the judgement of the Leiden professor M. J. de Goeje (1836-1909), in a note
added to the manuscript, although he also remarked that Theunisz’ spelling was
abominable.27

The main chapter of the book is the last (pp. 51-87), about the question
whether Jesus is the son of God. It is preceded by six introductory chapters:

1) A dedication to the gentlemen of the States General (li-sulṭānūna [sic]
amīrīna, potentissimis imperatoribus), including a request to allow Theunisz to
teach Arabic (pp. 6-8).

2) An address entitled ‘To the reader’ (ilā qāriʿīna, ad lectorem) informing him
of the author’s love for the Arabic language and of his meeting and cooperation
with ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (pp. 9-17).

27 It is true that Theunisz often forgot diacritical dots in his Arabic writing, and sometimes
ligatured a character that can not be linked to the next character in a word, such as َٰdāl or َٰrāʾ. Once
in a while he notes a word as he has heard it, for instance when he writes razaktu instead of
razaqtu (I fed), or al-aklāmi instead of al-kalāmi. Another particularity is that he inflects the names
Djibrīl and Muḥhammad according to grammatical rules, but treats Masīḥ and ʿĪsā as names whose
forms are not effected by grammar. It could be interesting to study these aspects as well as the
traces of dialect or ‘middle Arabic’ in Theunisz’ language.
3) A part entitled ‘Some sayings from Muhammad, chosen from the Al-Quran’ (baḍu al-aklāmi [sic, for al-kalāmi] muḥammadin min al-qur’āni munassihūna [sic, for munassikhūna]; quaedam verba Mohamudi ex Alkorano desum[pt]a) (pp. 23-29). It consists of parts from surah 3 (3:35-37, 3:42-57) which relate how Mary is dedicated to God even before she is born, how she is educated by the pious Zacharia, how the archangel Gabriel tells her that she is chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah, and how after some hesitation, because no man has touched her, she accepts this as truth – all ‘sayings’ that were as acceptable to the Christian as they were to the Muslim.

One of the last verses quoted in this section, is ‘When Jesus became conscious of their disbelief, he cried: who will be my helpers in the cause of God? The disciples said: we will be God’s helpers. We believe in God, and bear thou witness that we have surrendered’. (Q 3:52) This is from the widely acclaimed translation by M. Pickthall, except that he writes Allah instead of God. I choose to translate Allah with God, because Theunisz translated the name as Deus, demonstrating his readiness to identify his God with ͑Abd al- ͑Azīz’.28 To the word ‘surrendered’, muslimūn in Arabic, Pickthall adds between brackets: ‘unto Him’, and in a footnote: ‘or “are Muslims”’. Theunisz does something remarkable here. In his main Latin text, he translates muslimūn as Muslimuni. In the column on the right, however, reserved for the literal translation of some words, he translates it as Reformati, the word that had been in use since the second half of the sixteenth century to indicate members of the Reformed church, or Protestants.29 He was not the only one to note that Muslims shared the Protestant conviction that only Scripture, sola scriptura, led the way to salvation, and not priests, saints or sacraments. In 1577, a British ambassador named Hogan had described the Moroccan sultan as ‘a vearie earnnest Protestant’ who was ‘well exercised in the Scriptures’ and against the worship of idols, just like Protestants.30

Very often, indeed, contemporary discussion in Europe about Islam was carried on in terms of the conflict between Christian denominations, which mattered more in this part of the world, than understanding a ‘false’ religion for its own

29 For ‘reformatus’ see R. Hoven, Lexique de la prose Latine de la Renaissance, Leiden, 1994, p. 306; Conversations, p. 27: ‘Qāla al-ḥawāriyyūna naḥnu ansāru allāhi āmann ālāhī wa-ashhad bi-annā muslimūna’ is translated as: ‘Dixerunt: induti albis vestibus nos discipulis Dei (erimus,) credimus in Deum et attestari [sic] quod nos sumus Muslimuni.’ In the margin Albati is given as an alternative for induti albis vestibus, and Reformati for Muslimuni. Sallima can mean ‘to hand over intact’.
sake. Usually, however, Islam was associated with the other party, not with one’s own. As Reland observed in the preface to his *De Religione Mohammedica*, some Catholics accused ‘Lutherans’ (and that category included Calvinists) of helping the Muslims to establish the kingdom of Mahomet, because the ‘Lutherans’ shared with Muslims an aversion of the ‘worship of images’ (*beeldendienst*) and abolished all free will, believing that everything is predestined by God. In contrast, Reland argued that the fact that Muslims held certain convictions, did not render these wrong *per se*. But even his position in the discussion between the Catholic and the Protestant churches was not so neutral as to withhold him from remarking that one might as well say that there existed more correspondence between the Muslims’ and the Catholic faith, for instance where the prayers for the dead were concerned, the visits to graves, the pilgrimage, the intercession by saints who had died, the dietary laws and the value accorded to good works. Compared to such deeply-rooted polemical attitudes, Theunisz’ views of Islam, or at least of the religion as ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz explained it to him, were much more open.

4) Then follows a point-by-point repetition (pp. 29-33) of the previous chapter, paraphrasing in very short sentences the information about Mary and Jesus in the Quran. (For instance: ‘Jesus (ʿīsā) was the son of Mariam and his name is the Messiah (*al-masīḥ*). Jesus was sent with a sign from God. Jesus said: fear God and obey Him. Jesus cured blindness and lepers on the authority of God. God raises those who follow Jesus above those who do not believe, until the Day of Judgement, etc.’) The chapter has an unfinished beginning – the enumeration starts with two lines that are left blank in the Arabic as well as in the Latin text – and a curious end. The last page contains the Apostolic Christian creed – except that Theunisz does not write that Jesus descended to hell (*descendit ad inferos*), but that he descended to earth.


32 Reland, *Verhandeling* (as in n. 3), pp. x- xii.

33 *Conversations*, p. 33: ‘descendit in terram; wa-nazala fī-l-arḍi’. How the word ‘hell’ in the Apostolic creed is to be interpreted, literally or metaphorically, is a point of doctrine that is still being discussed among Christian theologians today. Theunisz’ deviation from the mainstream protestant and reformist formulation is noted here, because it could perhaps be seen as a concession to the Muslim belief that Jesus did not die and resurrect after three days, but that God raised him to heaven while he was alive.
Since the chapter is marked just like the others, by blank pages separating it from the previous and the next parts, there can be no doubt that this creed was meant to be read as part of the paraphrase from a section of the Quran. One can imagine that Theunisz had trouble deciding on a title. The content of the chapter suggests that he would have thought of words such as ‘correspondence’ (between Muslim and Christian knowledge) or ‘true’ (facts). If we try to understand why he combined these ‘truths’ from the Quran and the Apostolic creed in one chapter, our best explanation is that they are all about essential beliefs from different sources that he accepted. But he must have realised that putting a label to this acceptance of parts of the Quran would be too demanding of the broad-mindedness of the members of the States General.

5) The next chapter (pp. 35-43) is headed ‘Johannes’ (jūḥannā) and is a creed, or at least the very personal point of view on religious issues that Theunisz seems to have reached through the dialogue with his Muslim friend. As a Mennonite, Theunisz must also have written a personal creed at the occasion of his baptism as an adult, and (re)formulating one’s own deepest belief was important to him. This chapter gives his stances with regard to the differences in religious beliefs that remained between ´Abd al-´Azīz and him, after all their discussions. The style becomes very insistent here, not only as a result of the simple syntax and the limited vocabulary Theunisz had at his disposal, but also because these differences mattered so much to him. ‘Jesus is the one whom God called His son in the Gospel’, he writes, ‘he was sent by God because of our sins. [\ldots] Jesus’ disciples wrote the Gospels after he was raised to heaven. They wrote what they had seen with their own eyes, and heard with their own ears from Jesus’ [\ldots] ‘Jesus resurrected from death on the third day.’ ‘No-one can go to heaven except in the name of Jesus.’ ‘There is no other gospel than the one we have.’

The last remark must have been the answer to the Muslim belief, which ´Abd al-´Azīz is bound to have brought up, that Jesus certainly received the true Gospel from

God, but that it was lost, and only replaced by the Gospels of the four evangelists, who had introduced the mistakes humans make.

For a twenty-first-century reader, Theunisz’ most remarkable claim is perhaps that ‘God’s angel Gabriel did not come to Muhammad. God’s angel Gabriel has not said anything to Muhammad. [...] Gabriel, the angel of God, does not lie about anything.’35 That was an old defence against Islam, going back to Thomas Aquinas.36 What is at stake, is the truth of the divine revelation. If Muhammad did not receive the Quran or any other message from the archangel, the revelation of the Muslim tradition was not divine truth. Moreover, that Gabriel had not spoken to Muhammad proved that the latter was not a prophet. In fact, there has been no prophet after Jesus, wrote Theunisz (p. 42) and he continued with another trope from the anti-Islam polemical tradition, that is that Muhammad did not go to heaven, but brought the sword, murder and a false religion.37 Rather, Muhammad ‘turned everything around and corrupted it’.38

Gabriel did come to Maria, writes Theunisz, and one of the things he announced to her was that her son would be called the son of God. However, ‘none of us has said that God is father and mother’, as apparently ’Abd al-‘Azīz had objected to him. ‘The Messiah is the son of God, the Messiah is the spirit of God.’ Muhammad, on the contrary, ‘is born from the semen of his father, and is not the light of God’.39

6) Theunisz’ creed is followed by the ‘creed of ’Abd al-‘Azīz the Muslim’ (pp. 45-51), in Arabic on left and right pages alike, and with the Latin translation in the margins. It is introduced by a title-page in florid large handwriting, more elaborate than any other part of the book (see plate 1). The motivation for decorating this page relatively lavishly may be a sense of the exotic flavour of the creed, but it may also be a sign of respect and nostalgia for a friend. The pages

35 Conversations, p. 36: ‘Jibrīlun malakun allāhi lā jā’a ilā muḥammadin. Jibrīlun malakun allāhi lā qāla li-muḥammadin bi-shay’in [...] Jibrīlun malakun allāhi lā kadhaba bi-shay’in; Gabriel Angelus Dei non venit ad Mohamadum. Gabriel Angelus Dei non dixit Mohamado quicquam [...] Gabriel Angelus Dei non mentitus est in re aliqua.’


38 Conversations, p. 38: ‘Muḥammadus istabdala kulla shay’in wa-sararahā; Muḥammadus mutavit omnia eaque corrumpens.’

39 Conversations, p. 37: ‘Laysa qāla wāḥidun minnā inna allāha lahu abbun wa-ammn. [...] Masīḥu ibnu allāhi. Masīḥu rūhu allāhi. [...] Muḥammadun minanu al-abīhi fa-lā nūru allāhi; Non dixit aliquis ex nostris quod Deo sit pater et mater [...] Masias (est) filius Dei, Masias (est) spiritus Dei. [...] Muḥammadus semen patris sui, et non lux Dei.’
seem to rephrase a creed that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz had written on Theunisz’ request, as both the form and the content would suggest. First, there are references in the margins of the pages, to numbers of folios and to what seem to be line numbers. They do not refer to the Quran that Theunisz had received from ‘Abd al-‘Azīz as a present, and library catalogues do not mention another Quran that Theunisz possessed, so that the references do not seem to indicate that Theunisz compared ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’ tenets with the holy book. It is more likely that the references point to folios and lines ‘Abd al-‘Azīz had written himself. If that is the case, then Theunisz slightly rearranged the order of doctrinal points in his friend’s creed, and the young Moroccan himself must have started by correcting Theunisz’ misconception of Jesus. ‘God has no son’ (Allāhu laysa lahu ibnun; Deo non est filius ei, the translation showing the grammar of the Arabic sentence) occurs on the third page of Theunisz’ rendering, but has reference number 4.4, the lowest number among these references. The remark is followed – in Theunisz’s book – by ‘He who says that God has a son will burn in hell.’ Then, after some omitted points of belief, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz must have continued by stating that ‘the Messiah
is the servant of God, the spirit of God. Jesus will descend from heaven and reveal that the religion of Muhammad is the true religion.’ (Reference in the margin: fol 5.2, 5.3; 9.7).40

In Theunisz’ rendering, however, this comes all later, and the chapter begins, more historically than polemically, with the statement that Muhammad was born 561 years after Jesus ascended to heaven.41 He, Muhammad, was the best of the prophets, and made a heavenly journey in the 591th year after Jesus. He came back and brought fasting, prayer and other religious observances. Until the end of the world there will be no other prophet, except Jesus. He who believes in the religion of Muhammad will not burn in hell. He who does not believe in it, will burn in hell. When Jesus, after his descent, goes back to heaven, it will be his spirit, not his body.

The creed closes with some miracles that prove that Muhammad was not like other men (he had no shadow) and that God wanted people to believe him (he let the moon descend from the sky, when people asked for it as proof of his prophet-hood; the snake spoke to him, and told people that he was God’s servant).

7) ‘Questions and answers that occur between a Muslim and a Christian with regard to our understanding of the Messiah – whether he is the son of God or not’ is the title of the last chapter (pp. 51-87).42 After many weeks of talking about the differences and correspondences between the Christian and the Muslim religions, this had remained as the main obstacle between the two believers. And they realised that the root of the problem, which prevented them from getting any closer to one another, lay in the status of the two holy scriptures. The fact that the Bible existed before the Quran, was proof to Theunisz of its truth and authority. That the prophet Muhammad is not announced in it (p. 43), proved that he must be a false prophet, whose Quran was therefore true nor divine. For

40 Conversations, p. 47: ‘Man qāla inna allāhu lahu ibnun yukharriqu [sic] bi-l-nāri; Quid dixit quod Deo sit filius comburetur igni’; p. 48: ‘Masīḥu ‘abdu allāhi, masīḥu huwa rūḥu allāhi [...] ’īsā yanzilu min al-masā’i wa yaqūlu dinan muḥammadin inna huwa šāhīhu; Masias est servus Dei, Masias ille est spiritus Dei[...]; Jesus descendet de coelo et dicet religio Mohamadi (est) religio vera.’

41 Conversations, p. 46: ‘Mawlidun muḥammadin sallama fī-āmi wāḥidin wa-sittīn wa-khamsatin mi’atin bada ṭulū’ī ’īsā; Generatio Mohamadi accidit anno primo et sexagesimo et quingentesimo post ascensionem Jesu.’

42 Conversations, p. 51: ‘Sa’alatun wa-jawābuhā alladhāni humā kānā bayna muslimin wa-naṣrānīyyin am aji masīha [sic] li-yafhama innahu huwa ibnu allāhi am lam huwa; Inquisitio et responsio quae fuit inter Mahumetistam et Christianum de Mesia ad intelligendum an ille sit filius Dei, nec ne.’
'Abd al-'Azîz, the fact that Muhammad came later than Jesus was proof that by that time God had decided that there was a need for a better prophet and the Christian Gospels needed correction. In his view, Theunisz believed in a lie, and the last lines Theunisz lets him speak in his book are: ‘I give you this bit of instruction so that you may not persist in what is false, and may not believe the people who teach you lies’.\textsuperscript{43} To which the Christian replied that 'Abd al-'Azîz covered the truth with lies.\textsuperscript{44}

In fact, Theunisz keeps forgetting what it means that to 'Abd al-'Azîz the Bible is really not a holy book, while the Quran was God’s word. ‘Who told you that Jesus is the son of Mary?’, he once asked 'Abd al-'Azîz, with the intention to lure his friend into the trap. 'Abd al-'Azîz gave the anticipated answer: ‘It is written in the Quran, that the angel said to Mary: God rejoices you with His word, that his name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mariam’ or in Arabic: \textit{inna allâhu yubashshiruki bikalimat minhu ismuhu al-masîhu Isâ ibnu Mariama} (fol. 52; Quran 3:45); In Latin Theunisz translates this as: ‘\textit{ecce Deus evangelizat tibi verbo a se nomen eius est Masias Jesus filius Mariae’}. Yubashshiruki is \textit{evangelizat tibi}, so that Theunisz can reply that, indeed, it was Gospel – that is, the \textit{evangelic} word – long before the Quran existed. And it is also written in the Gospel, that God told the Messiah ‘you are my beloved son’. But 'Abd al-'Azîz was not impressed. Your Gospel is corrupted, he must have answered, a claim Theunisz found too harshly controversial to write down. But he does quote his friend saying: ‘\textit{We received [the Scripture] from Gabriel and Muhammad, you received it from people just like you, to whom no miracles have happened’}.\textsuperscript{45} People, that is, who were bound to make mistakes.

For 'Abd al-'Azîz, apparently, the fact that Muhammad had performed miracles, proved his status as a true prophet.\textsuperscript{46} And because ever since the Middle Ages Christian authors had maintained that Muhammad had played all sorts of tricks to fake miracles (e.g. how a bull was tricked to bring a copy of the Quran

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Conversations}, p. 86: ‘\textit{Wa-hâdhâ qa’llûn’ allamnûka bihi liyallâ [sic, for li’allâ] lâ tataba’a ba’dal al-lâmi al-bâ’tîla wa-lâ tûmina bi-alladhî yi allumûkûm bi-l-kadhbatî; Hoc ergo pauco docuimus te, ne sequeris post haec falsum neque creas in eos qui docuerunt vos mendacia.’

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Conversations}, p. 54: ‘\textit{Talbisu al-ḥaqqa bi-l-bâ’tîli liyallâ [sic] yazhura al-ḥaqqu; Tu velas verum falso, ne appareat verum’. Also on pp. 38 and 67.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Conversations}, p. 70: ‘\textit{Naḥnu akhadnû min jibrîlin wa-muḥammadin fa ḍantum akhadatum min insânîn mithlikum lâ lahum mughjazâtûn; Nos accepimus a Gabriele et Muhammado, sed vos accepistis ab hominibus sicut vos (estis) quibus non (fuit) mirabilia.’

\textsuperscript{46} This point of view is not shared by all Muslims. The more orthodox view is that the prophet himself did not perform miracles, but that God showed his special favour to him by granting that miracles happen to them or through them. For a discussion of the meaning of miracles, notably of the splitting of the moon, see U. Rubin, ‘\textit{Muhammad’s Message in Mecca: Warnings, Signs and Miracles’}, in: J.E. Brockopp, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad}, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 39-60.
to Muhammad, and how a magnet was installed in a mosque where he was to be buried, so that the prophet’s lead-lined coffin was elevated, as if by the invisible hand of God – some of these are addressed by Reland), Theunisz duly included some of the miracles which ‘Abd al-Azīz had told him in his book.

It is interesting to read that the two discussants came particularly close on an issue that was at least as sensitive as Jesus’ status, and of far-reaching political implications: that of predestination. In simple terms, the question was who would go to heaven: all believers or only certain categories of believers? And did man have any say in it? In Ash’arism, the orthodoxy of Islam in the Maghrib of the time, man was not predestined for heaven or hell, but the judgement of who would be deserving of heaven was exclusively in the hands of God. This is what ‘Abd al-Azīz believed, as he made abundantly clear: ‘Muhammad said to us: we will all die, and after death we go to Paradise in heaven on the authority of God, not on the authority of anyone else. No one can go to heaven except by God’s will.’ That was precisely the point of view of the Protestants, who rejected the Roman Catholic belief that confession and absolution and other sacraments delivered by priests mattered much for one’s chances of eternal salvation. Perhaps words like these also motivated Theunisz to translate muslimūn with Reformati.

But the issue of predestination was more intricate than this. The question was also whether, besides God’s gracious judgement alone, there was a role to be played not by priests but by man’s own free will. This was the subject of a fierce debate that had been raging in the Dutch Republic since about two years, with sweeping social and political consequences. It had started at the University of Leiden with a conflict between the theologians Arminius and Gomarus. In January 1610 the ‘Remonstrants’, who followed Arminius, formulated their objections against the strict Calvinist view of predestination which Gomarus defended, and which held that God has determined even before the creation of the world, who would be good and elected for salvation and therefore receive faith, and who would be evil and damned. Mennonites rejected the doctrine that only God’s choice determined one’s election for salvation even more emphatically than Remonstrants, and believed that man has the task and the possibility to cooperate with his being chosen. Where Calvin had emphasised that man is...
inclined to evil, Mennonites put more emphasis on the Word that God created men as good beings, as Theunisz mentioned in his personal creed (pp. 35 and 82). **Sous-entendu** in Theunisz’ words is the idea that faith and good works are closely related, and that man is not predestined for heaven or hell (although God is prescient of who will be saved). This was not something he was going to write explicitly in a work that was to be offered to the Calvinist authorities and curators of the Leiden University. But it may explain Theunisz’ enthusiasm when ’Abd al-’Azīz said: ‘It is written in the Quran that God created Adam and Eve initially in Paradise, and said “if you eat from this tree, you are sinners”.’ Adam did not intend to break the oath, but he was misled by the Devil. Later he repented and begged God for forgiveness.\(^49\) ‘God bless you,’ Theunisz exclaimed, confirming the image of man they both shared: a man with a desire for what is good and endowed with the capacity of repentance and of conquering his evil inclinations. ‘You have spoken better than before. Here is a word of truth, although you clad the truth in falseness. But continue!’\(^50\) There is an unmistakable rhetorical quality, however, in the fact that these are almost the final words of the book.

**Career and salvation**

What was Theunisz’ intention with this book? In the first place, as mentioned, he wished to demonstrate to the States-General his versatility in Arabic, hoping they would allow him to make a living doing what he liked best. That he not just translated, but actually wrote in Arabic, was indeed remarkable in that time. It is strange in this respect, that the book is not quite finished: it bears no title, the title of the fifth chapter is lacking, and there are numerous minor mistakes. One wonders if the copy in the Regional Archive was the final copy, or a draft. Perhaps the copy which the States-General received was lost altogether. In any case, the States-General granted Theunisz a generous award of 200 guilders for the book, more than a year’s salary for a university lector.


\(^50\) *Conversations*, pp. 85-86: ‘Tabāraka Allāhu, fa-qad qalta qawlan maliḥan min qabla shay’un fihi ḥaqqun wa-labasta al-haqqan bi’l-bāṭili. Wa-msḥi taqul; Benedicat huic Deus, etenim nunc locatus es locutionem meliorem quam ante, aliquid in eo (est) verum et velasti verum cum falso. Sed perge loqueris [in the margin: loqui].’
Secondly, Theunisz probably also wished to provide readers of his book with arguments in the defence of Christianity against Islam. But if this were his main motivation, he would not have given 'Abd al-'Azīz so much space, almost as much as he reserves for his own explanations. As it stands, he rather demonstrates how difficult it is to convince a pious Muslim of the Christian point of view. He explains some of the views of 'Abd al-'Azīz on sensitive issues such as Jesus and the authority of the Gospel, and shows why, from the Muslim point of view, the Christian faith in them is illogical. In this sense he precedes Reland.

A different question is what Theunisz was looking for in his conversations with 'Abd al-'Azīz. The answer presents itself in the way he wrote them down: he wanted to find the common ground between his guest and himself, to reduce all the legend and lore, the Scripture and the certainties, to their essential beliefs and core differences, hoping secretly to solve the discrepancies. 'Tell me whether there is much difference between your Gospel and ours,' he said to 'Abd al-'Azīz, 'show me, so that I may understand, and it will be to the glory of God.'

The ideas of comparison and compatibility pervade the chapters about Mary of course, but also 'Abd al-'Azīz' 'creed'. The form of this piece of text is analogous to the Christian creed, and its contents have nothing to do with the aqīda (the usual word for creed in Islam, from the same root as i’tiqād, the word they used for 'Abd al-'Azīz' creed) that was popular in northern Africa at the time, and that was based on the Ash’arī doctrine regarding the characteristics of God and the prophets. One could regard this as a lack of interest, on the part of Theunisz, for 'Abd al-'Azīz' understanding of his own religion. But that would be anachronistic. The fact that the Muslim’s beliefs were discussed and presented in this form should be seen rather as the reflection of a shared interest in establishing commonality, each of course from his own convictions, but on equal terms. It is difficult to make out whether it was 'Abd al-'Azīz or Theunisz who introduced the figure of Mary in this context. Theunisz had probably read parts of the Quran during his studies with Raphelengius, and knew that it had interesting things to say about Mary, so he may have questioned 'Abd al-'Azīz about it. At the same time 'Abd al-'Azīz may well have been aware of the role Mary played, notably

51 *Conversations*, pp. 72 and 73: ‘[...]fa-in alladhī 'indakum wa-alladhī 'inda-nā baynahumā shay'un kathīrīn 'akhbīrīn 'a rifuūh wa-l-hamdū li-llāhi; [...]et an illud quod apud vos (est) et illud quod apud nos (est) sit intermedium eorum magnum, indica mihi ut intelligam illud et sit laus Deo.’

in those years, in the relationship between Muslims, Moriscos and ‘old’ Christians in Spain and the Maghreb. Amy Remensnyder describes how the ‘Marian language’, as she calls it, functioned, on the one hand, as a barricade between Christian and Muslim communities and identities, but, on the other, as a connecting narrative.53

Of course Theunisz wished that he could bring ‘Abd al-’Azīz to convert to Christianity. And sometimes, ‘Abd al-’Azīz must have seemed so close to it, or to Theunisz himself for that matter, that it made the latter almost desperate about the final minor differences that they could not overcome. ‘The Messiah is the servant of God, sent by God to carry out the will of his father,’ said Theunisz. ‘This is the truth. Indeed, the Messiah is the spirit of God, as you also confirm. You say he is the spirit of God. We say he is the son of God. What’s the difference?’54 If only ‘Abd al-’Azīz would not take things so literally!

If only Theunisz would not risk the welfare of his soul, ‘Abd al-’Azīz replied. Many times he must have answered Theunisz as he did on page 57: ‘You will see on the Day of Resurrection. He [i.e., ‘Deus’, Theunisz added between brackets in the translation] has said in the Quran that he who says that God has a son will burn [literally, be burned] in tormenting hell.’55 He will burn in hell, yuharrigu fi nārin, is repeated three more times in the book. The first time we can perhaps even hear ‘Abd al-’Azīz say it, with insistence, because Theunisz accidently wrote yukharriqu.56 But Theunisz was just as unshakable as ‘Abd al-’Azīz and said: ‘I do not fear your words, because they do not come from God.’57 Ultimately, the discussion was tightly wedged between their respective truths. Such fierce words, however, say more about the importance of their religion to each of them, than about their relationship.

55 Conversations, p. 57: ‘Tanẓuru fi yawmi al-qiyāmati fa-innahu qāla fi-l-qurāʾni inna man qāla inna allāha lahu ibnun yuharrigu bi-l-nāri al-adhābi; Videbis die resurrectionis. (Deus) enim dicit in Alkorano quod si quis dixerit, quod Deus habeat filium comburetur igni abyssi.’
56 The difference between yuharrigu and the more emphatic yuharrigu (p. 47) is only one dot, and the mistake may be due to the same inaccuracy regarding dots in other places, although it usually involved omitting them, not adding them where they should not be.
57 Conversations, p. 57: ‘Lā khiftu min qawlika li-anahu laysa min allāhi. Non timeo alloquia tua eo quod illa non sit [sic, for sint] a Deo.’
The public version of the book was drawn up well after 'Abd al-'Azīz had left, but the passion with which both men argued comes sharply across in the colloquial style of the last chapter. Many times we hear them say things such as ‘listen, really!’ (isma', audi enim), or ‘I tell you’ (aqūlu laka, dicam tibi), and ‘truly, I will tell you with whom he wrote the Quran, and other books! (anā ūjibu wa ukhbiruka laka bi-man kataba al-qur'āna wa ghayrahu; ego respondebo tibi, et indicabo tibi [cum quo] scripsert Alquranum et praeter eum, pp. 69, 70) and finally even ‘look what you’re saying! (unẓur mā taqūl, vide quid dicas, p. 86). Indeed, all this excitement was about nothing less than eternal salvation. Both believers separated main issues from adiaphora. For instance, 'Abd al-'Azīz did not restrain from telling Theunisz, the later innkeeper and distiller of brandy, that God forbade alcohol (Conversations, p. 74). His host mentioned it in his book, as an integral part of the Muslim faith and perhaps with admiration for 'Abd al-'Azīz’ practiced piety. But apparently they saw no reason to discuss the matter extensively, because there is only this single note.

**The intimacy of a dictionary**

The most lively image of their cooperation, and a glimpse of their personalities even, can be found in what would seem the dullest source, that is a glossary of Arabic words and phrases that Theunisz compiled. It is a work of which five large volumes remain, with lists of words (volumes 8, 10 and 11) and lists of short sentences that were collected in the first place with a view to translating parts of the Quran in Latin (vol 7), and translating Christian texts into Arabic (volume 9). By way of recognition for the valuable gifts, Theunisz wrote that his work on a Dictionary (which was not finished), and on his Grammar, was made possible by the various books that 'Abd al-'Azīz had donated him. But

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58 The information about the time of writing is confusing. In the preface to Doctissimorum … testimonia Theunisz himself wrote: ‘Tandem venit mihi in mentem, anno elapso Dialogum quendam cum Arabe predicto habitum … exhibere.’ However, he received 200 guilders from the States of Holland and West-Friesland for the book in December 1610. Molhuysen, Bronnen, vol. 2, p. 42, n. 1. Molhuysen writes that it is not known for which book this remuneration was intended, but as far as we know it is the only book Theunisz did in fact dedicate to the States.

59 'Abd al-Azīz explains that the Prophet wrote the Quran with the help of the archangel Gabriel.

60 Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM III C 7-11. In M.B. Mendes da Costa, De handschriften, krachtens bruikleencontract in de Universiteitsbibliotheek berustende, eerste gedeelte: de handschriften van de Remonstrantse Kerk, Amsterdam, 1923, p. 372, these volumes were mistakenly attributed to Dionysius Vossius, but the handwriting identifies them beyond doubt as products from the pen of Theunisz. Even the Quran that 'Abd al-Azīz gave to Theunisz, with a dedication to his name, was catalogued as belonging to D. Vossius. Vossius may have inherited it from Theunisz.

61 Theunisz, Doctissimorum … testimonia (as in n. 10), preface.
'Abd al-'Azīz was of course involved in other ways too, as appears most obviously in volume 9, where a series of sentences with the words for ‘to ask, to request’ features sa’alanī’Abd al-‘Azīz, rogavit me Abdul Aziz.

It is likely that Theunisz had begun to establish a list of words, just for his own use, before he met ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, during his study of Arabic in the house of Raphelengius. He knew Raphelengius’ dictionary already prior to its 1613 publication, and may have assisted Raphelengius’ sons (as proof-reader, copyist, type-setter, perhaps all) to publish their father’s work after his death.62 A comparison with that dictionary can therefore yield interesting information. Raphelengius’ dictionary was drawn from existing glossaries, various copies of the Quran, and Arabic translations of the Pentateuch, the Psalms and the Gospels, to which Theunisz also had access. But Theunisz’ lexicon is different in three significant ways. The first is the alphabetic order. While Raphelengius used an order very similar to that used in modern Arabic dictionaries (except that he did not differentiate between letters with and without a diacritic dot, so that for instance ṣād and dād were lumped together), Theunisz took the older system in which the consonants are ordered in the same way as in the Hebrew, Phoenician and Semitic ‘alphabets’ (or rather abjads), and the system whereby the middle radicals are the first that change as the list progresses.63 For example, the first pages are for words which have alif as the first radical, and bā as the last radical. These are not noted, however, and the marker by which words are searched, is the middle radical. On each page there is a middle column of all the letters in the alphabet. Where the combination of the three forms a root known to Theunisz, it is noted. For instance: khaṭaba, khalaba, khaṣaba, kharaba. Then derivations and translations are added. Much space is left open, so that the list could keep growing. Quite often either the left or the right page has no column of middle radicals, and is not meant for headwords, but for extra information and example phrases on the facing page. A second difference with the Dictionarium Raphelengii is that Raphelengius gave the meaning of Arabic words in Latin, and often noted parallel roots in Hebrew, Theunisz noted almost as many meanings in Dutch as in Latin (and sometimes notes variants in Hebrew, Greek and Ethiopian).

62 A. Hamilton, ‘’Nam tirones sumus”. Franciscus Raphelengius' Lexicon Arabico-Latinum (Leiden 1613)’. De Gulden Passer, vol. 66:6, 1988-1989, pp. 557-589 (579-580); F. Raphelengius, Franciscii Raphelengii Lexicon Arabicum, Leiden: Raphelengius, 1613; Theunisz noted in his copy of the Lexicon (now Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM III E 23) that he made it from Raphelengius’ own version, with permission of the sons, in 1611. He therefore must have meant the version then still in manuscript.

63 The so-called abjad ‘alphabet’ ends with tā’. The final five letters are added.
The third, most remarkable, aspect is the extent to which Theunisz’ list reflects a living language, one that he was learning from a native speaker. A small sample shows how many of the words and translations did not come from books, but from working with ‘Abd al-Azīz – studying a text together, or the one copying, the other compiling his glossary – in a room where a stove was burning; and from talking over dinner not only about religion, but about the neighbours, the cat, the weather. Next to the word hijra (emigration, notably the Prophet’s to Medina) for instance, Theunisz noted hirr, catus, kat (volume 11). For turāb, translated by Raphelengius as humus, terra, pulvis, Theunisz noted the Dutch word for peat (turf), which is the fuel that was most commonly used in stoves, and which ‘Abd al-Azīz must have called turāb. Likewise, ghurfa is not only translated as upstairs room, hall (bovencamer, zaal in Theunisz’ list and coenaculum, cubobulum, cella in Raphelengius), but also as spoon (lepel, pollepel). And while Raphelengius gave ‘tabernaculum tentorium’ as the translation of khayma, Theunisz learned that khayma are ‘tents for travelling. Maures in Barbary replace and walk from one place to th’other through the entire year’ (reissten ten. Mooren in Barberiën versetten en sloopen van de en dander plaats tgansche jaar door; volume 8). Because of ‘Abd al-Azīz too, Theunisz not only knew the Arabic word for gum Arabic (a product that was indispensable for making ink and for which Europe depended on Barbary in the seventeenth century), but also the name of the tree from which it exudes, taydun in dialect (volume 8).64

In spite of the few hours of daylight in those months they worked hard, writing hours on end, only stopping to dip their pen in the inkwell. Ghaṭasa, a word that is not mentioned in Raphelengius’ dictionary, means ‘to dip’ (instippen, indoopen), Theunisz noted. They also used a pencil, itmudun, that has however left no traces. Perhaps ‘Abd al-Azīz used it when he drew something to explain a particular item in the glossary, such as şubkhun şabhiyyatun. This was a ‘glass lamp, water under, oil on top’ (Glasen lamp onder water boven olij in, volume 10), a type of lamp whose name was unknown to Raphelengius.

Sometimes ‘Abd al-Azīz must have literally used his hand and feet to express the meaning of a word. For şafaḥa (volume 10) for instance, Theunisz had first noted ‘conciliare’. Later he added, with ink of a slightly different colour, ‘to reconcile, taking each others hands’ (met malcander versoenen slaande de handen tsamen). And speaking to the imagination most of all, portraying our two enthusiasts radiant with concentration on their work and smiling, no doubt, is this one,

64 D. van Dalen, Arabische gom. De fascinerende biografie van een van de meest exotische producten op aarde, Amsterdam, 2006.
in volume 11: *daraja* (see plate 2b) Raphelengius had noted meanings in the sense of moving gradually and arranging (*repere, moveri, gradatim incedere. Nam in forma gravi ordinare, ordinem statuere*). Theunisz wrote: ‘to ascend stairs’ (*trappen opgaan*). And then in a different ink: ‘to hop, to flap with wings like the birds’ (*hippelen, als de vogels met wieken slaan*).

These examples show that there are many words and sample sentences that Theunisz did not expect to use in a translation of religious texts, but that he learned them purely for the pleasure of learning a new language, of understanding and being understood in it. Significant, for instance, is the short sentence he wrote down near the verb *ẓalama* (volume 11), which means to be dark, as Raphelengius knew: *obscurum esse*. Theunisz noted as an example *ẓalama al-shams* (i.e. the sun was obscured). On the page next to this one, a page reserved for notes, he added: *yā ṣāḥib mā ẓalamtuka*, amice non facio tibi iniuriam, that is: my friend, I do not mean to be unjust to you. Was it what ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz said when he saw Theunisz’ reaction to his warning that he would burn in hell? It was certainly a phrase Theunisz wanted to remember, in case he would need it himself.

In the same volume we find an intriguing note next to the pronoun *anā*, I. Immediately next to it, it says: *fi sanatin alf wa khamsiya wa khamsa wa tisʿin li-mawludi rabbināʾ isū al-masīh* and in Latin: ‘anno 1595 nativitate Dom.’ It may be deduced that ‘I’ did or experienced something that explained something about him, or even identified him, ‘in the year 1595 after the birth of our lord Jesus the Messiah’. But we can only guess what it was and who is concerned. 1595 may be the year that ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was born. In that case, he would have been only fourteen in the first months of 1610. It seems very young, but he would not have been the only secretary at that age. The note may also refer to the year Theunisz first started to learn Arabic, or perhaps to the year ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was circumcised, or the year in which he had learned the Quran by heart. There is not much to go by, but we are amply compensated by another note related to ‘I’ on the page next to this one: *ʿal-imānu alladhī yukmalu biʾl-ḥubbi; fides quae perficitur in caritate*. That is: ‘the faith that is realised by charity, or love.’ It gives us the intimacy of a diary in the pages of a dictionary. The Latin expression is the original, it comes from the Bible, notably from the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians, 5:6. In this letter, Paul talks about God’s law and its meaning for the separate communities of Christians, Jews and sons of Hagar.

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65 Also in 1610, the ambassador of the Moroccan sultan Samuel Pallache was accompanied and assisted in his duties by Paolo Garcés, then about twelve years old, who translated letters for him from Dutch to Spanish and Portuguese. See M. García-Arenal and G.A. Wiegers, *Samuel Pallache. Koopman, kaper en diplomaat tussen Marrakesh en Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 2014, p. 147.
Plates 2a and 2b (detail), Theunisz’ glossary, vol. 11, Amsterdam University Library, shelfmark OTM III C 7-11. Courtesy of Amsterdam University Library.
The entire sentence from which the quote was taken is (in the language of the King James Bible): ‘For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.’ This evaluation of different outward signs of religion versus faith did not make it to the reflection of the two men’s discussions for public use. But, written under the caption of the word ‘I’, it identified at least one of them, and we may assume that it formed the core of their relationship.

Framing the Conversations

The Conversations constitute an extraordinary text, but to assess how unique this manuscript really is, it is worthwhile to compare it with three other inter-religious exchanges: a refutation of the Christian apostolic creed of 1609, a report of a dialogue between the Muslim al-Ḥajarī and the French scholar Etienne Hubert, and the correspondence between the Orthodox Christian Ibn Buṭrus and the Leiden professor of Arabic Jacob Golius.

Probably also in 1609, the same year that Theunisz and ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz met, sultan Mulay Zaydān commissioned the writing of a polemic treatise, a refutation of the Christian Apostolic creed. It was most likely written by a Morisco, Muhammad Alguazir, who fled to Marrakesh after the expulsion of Moriscos and Jews from Spain. This author was well informed about the Christian (Catholic) doctrines. The refutation, written in Spanish, was addressed to Christians with whom the sultan’s court was intensifying its relations. It reached the Dutch stadtholder Maurice of Nassau, through the hands of the Moroccan ambassador to the Republic in 1610-1611, Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh, whom Maurice had asked during an official banquet about the Muslim point of view regarding Jesus. The answer he received two years later was indeed more than table-talk. It was a pamphlet of more than a hundred pages, that criticised Christian (and some Jewish) doctrines, such as the concept of trinity, Christ’s status of Creator, Saviour and Glorifier, the belief that Jesus was crucified and then raised to heaven, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, and the Catholic confession.66 Most of these topics are more specialised than the ones broached by Theunisz and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, and compared to the very learned discussion of the treatise, the dialogue between the latter is of a much more dilettante nature. Obviously, perhaps, because it was not only the written reflection of a direct exchange, but written moreover in Arabic by someone who had only a limited knowledge of the language.

The same conclusion imposes itself when we compare the Conversations with another example of a direct exchange between a Muslim and a Christian (presumably a Catholic): the Muslim Aḥmad ibn Qāsim al-Ḥajarī and the Frenchman Hubert. Like Theunisz and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, Etienne Hubert (Stephanus Ubertus, d. 1614) and al-Ḥajarī discussed religion more than once, and al-Ḥajarī reported on these exchanges years later in his book about his travels to Europe. That report clearly shows that Hubert and al-Ḥajarī, both exquisitely learned in their own tradition, were also better informed about each other’s religion, and more versatile in their reasoning on the topic than Theunisz or ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz were. Indeed, like Alguazir, al-Ḥajarī came from Spain and had been raised outwardly as a Christian, while Hubert had spent time at the sultan’s court in Marrakesh.\(^{67}\) The themes they discuss are similar to those discussed by our friends (the father of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus and Muḥammad, the Muslim laws regarding fasting or alcohol), but they are considered in greater detail than in the work of their Dutch contemporary. And naturally, since the discussions in al-Ḥajarī’s book were recorded by a Muslim, the Muslim view ‘wins’, whereas in Theunisz’ book the Christian views prevail. Compared to al-Ḥajarī, both Theunisz and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz come across as pious believers, who are not particularly familiar with more academic discussions.

The report of their dialogue is also expressed in a different register, in more ordinary language, even if it is written in Arabic and Latin. In that respect the work may be compared with the letters the Christian Orthodox Niqūlāwus b. Buṭrus wrote to Golius. Just like the relationship between Theunisz and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, that between Ibn Buṭrus and Golius was characterised by mutual respect. Like ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, moreover, Ibn Buṭrus was for some months a guest in the household of his counterpart. His letters to Golius convey more or less everyday requests, information and greetings. The Conversations obviously do not have the same directness, but they do have the same frankness.

**Conclusions**

These comparisons bring me to the most remarkable characteristic of the Conversations. The dialogue between believers of different religions, often in the form of questions and answers, or of disputation and refutation, is an ancient genre in Islam and Christianity.\(^{68}\) But the dialogues in this genre are literary. They are imagined or stylised. As Jason Busic points out with regard to polemics in early

\(^{67}\) Van Koningsveld et al., Kitāb nāṣir (as in n. 7), pp. 25 and 44.

\(^{68}\) A. Akasoy, ‘Correspondence, philosophical’ in: K. Fleet et al., eds, Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE, Brill Online, 2015, s.v.
modern Spain (but the same may be said of the seventh-century dialogue between the Jew Abdallah al-Salām and the prophet Muhammad), they were usually meant to reaffirm a co-religious audience of the superiority of the author’s religion, and the need to stay within the religious community. Therefore, these narratives, according to Busic, rarely present a real dialogue, in that the interlocutors do not consider the ideas of the other. ‘Real dialogue never takes place, mutual understanding is never reached’.69 The dialogue between Theunisz and Abd al-‘Azīz was real, both in the sense that it actually took place – even though its reflection is unilateral and stylised – and in the sense that real objections were addressed, for instance when they talked about the status of the prophet Mohammed. Abd al-‘Azīz quoted some of his miracles to prove that he was a real prophet, and Theunisz gave them a prominent place in his book. It is true that in the case of our two protagonists, agreement in the field of theology was also not reached. But mutual understanding was both the point of departure and in itself the aim of their discussions.

Epilogue
At the end of winter, when the white hellebore (kharbaq ahyad, Dictionary volume 8) was blooming, Abd al-‘Azīz left for Mecca and Medina, to visit the grave of Muhammad, ‘as he had announced before,’ Theunisz wrote.70 His friend was a man of his word, he wanted us to know. As a farewell present, the pilgrim gave Theunisz his own Quran. It was a token of deep appreciation, at a time when Abd al-‘Azīz’ compatriot al-Ḥajarī felt hurt when he saw a copy of the Quran in the hands of his host Hubert.71 Moreover, Abd al-‘Azīz wrote a dedication to Theunisz in it, below the statements of previous owners, saying that the book was a gift to Theunisz (so that he could not be suspected of coming by it through unfair means), that would help him in his studies of the Arabic language. There is no sign of missionary insistence. He also left him the prayer book and ‘certain other books’ that he had copied for him, ‘in an elegant hand and with the diacritics’.72 Theunisz continued to study them, and used them to elaborate his lexicon and compile a grammar, to edit the Psalms and the Gospels in Arabic, and to edit and translate the letter of Paul to Titus into Arabic, a text he considered particularly

69 Busic, ‘Polemic and Hybridity’ (as in n. 36), p. 87.
70 Conversations, p. 17.
71 Van Koningsveld et al., Kitāb nāsir, p. 129.
72 Theunisz, Doctissimorum … testimonia, preface: ‘...additis punctis, artificiose admodum & eleganter, in usum meum exscripsit.’ The prayer book is in Amsterdam University Library, shelf-mark III A 16.
useful for teaching. Then he made a handsome book of the notes he had been taking of the conversations with 'Abd al-'Azīz on religion, and presented it to the curators of Leiden University. He offered them another, unspecified, Arabic book, of which he possessed two copies, and arranged for two written recommendations, one in Latin by a student (Isaac Bernardus) and another one in Spanish by the next Moroccan ambassador to the Republic, Aḥmad ibn 'Abdallāh. In February 1612, he presented curators with the booklet *Doctissimorum … testimonia*, in which he listed reasons given by famous scholars in neighbouring countries for the study of the Arabic language. It was accompanied by his Latin translation of the first surah and part of the second surah of the Quran, together with the Arabic text in his own handwriting. And finally he had a hold on them, and was appointed.

But it did not last. When the young and talented Erpenius returned from Paris, Theunisz could not compete with him. In March 1613, a year after he had been appointed (on probation) as lector, he was dismissed, while Erpenius was appointed professor of Oriental languages (Hebrew and Chaldaic excluded). From then on, Theunisz concentrated on his commercial business in Amsterdam. He printed, sold books and developed his inn into a famous locale, installing in it a fairy-tale sort of xylophone and a fabulous fountain. Much of his talent for oriental languages was wasted and, apart from a short spell in 1617 as professor of Hebrew at a private Academy run by the Amsterdam physician and playwright Samuel Coster’s, his academic aspirations were curtailed.

73 *D. Pauli Apostoli Epistola ad Titum*, an existing Arabic translation to which he added the diacritics and a Latin translation. One copy of the manuscript on grammar may be extant, in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. Robert Jones found the folios inside another work, but unfortunately lost the note he made concerning its whereabouts. See Jones, *Learning Arabic*, pp. 96 and 250, n. 275. I thank Robert Jones for searching his memory and giving me some clues about the location of the manuscript in a personal communication in August 2015.

74 Undated short letter and both recommendations in Leiden University Library, ms. AC1 42/2.

75 Theunisz, *Doctissimorum … testimonia*.

76 Leiden University Library, ms. AC1 20, fol. 336. Curators, who in those years hardly ever did appoint non-Calvinists, nevertheless gave Theunisz 200 guilders as an ‘honest good-bye’.

77 Mundy, *Travels*, p. 76.