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GERARD WIEGERS 

History and the Study of Religion. Prophecy, Imagination and Religion in the Granadan Lead Books, the Works of Jacobus Palaeologus and of Nicholas of Cusa*

This article challenges the observation that historians and the discipline of History have not been helpful in addressing some of the important challenges in the Study of Religion by concentrating on “the local” and on deconstruction rather than on construction and “the global.” By undertaking a cross-cultural case study — Medieval and Early Modern prophecies in the Muslim world and Europe — and focusing on the role and significance of the Granadan Sacromonte Lead Books (1588–1606) and the work of the radical Antitrinitarian Jacobus Palaeologus (1520–1585), this paper argues that global and connected microhistorical approaches have been of great value to developing the promising trend of a relational approach in the Study of Religion.

Is there a connection between the ideas of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), those of the radical Antitrinitarian theologian Jacobus Palaeologus (1520–1585), and those of the anonymous authors of the Granadan Lead Books (ca. 1588–1606)? This is a question that arose at some stage while I was doing research into the genealogy of prophecies contained in the Lead Books about an eschatological general council on the one true religion, to be held on the island of Cyprus under the aegis of the Ottoman sultan.

In the present essay I will reflect upon these questions in the framework of this thematic issue on History and the Study of Religion, taking my own personal perspective as an active researcher as a point of departure. In his

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introduction, Mattias Brand, who took the initiative in discussing these matters, states that the connections between History and the Comparative Study of Religion were once close, but that “from the 1960s, the prominence of history faded in what could be called an ‘anthropological turn’.” He highlights in this regard the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner. And Brand goes on to note that, most recently, “post-modern and postcolonial criticism embraced a particular type of historical analysis to deconstruct the lingering presuppositions, global inequalities, and normativities of the field,” thus leading to deconstruction and fragmentation rather than to construction and generalisation.

Let me immediately put my cards on the table by stating that I am not convinced that the reasons for a lack of dialogue between history and the comparative, systematic study of religion are to be found in the said anthropological turn. On the contrary, I will argue below that that the observed turn was accompanied by a larger trend of entangled and connected historical studies that deserves wider attention among students of religion. As an indication that such a dialogue has already existed for some time, I would point to the exchange of ideas between the historian Natalie Zemon Davis and the said anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which we can observe in Geertz’s review of her *Trickster Travels. A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds*, as well as their cooperation as members of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and her wide reading in social and cultural anthropology.¹ More generally, we are witnessing a trend in which Zemon Davis’s publication about the life and times of the Muslim captive whose Christian name was Leo Africanus is an exponent. This trend which is known under such names as entangled and global (conceptual) history, has in recent years begun to play a very important role not only in Medieval and Early Modern but also in Modern History, and is closely related to historical approaches in the anthropology of religion. The present author’s work (with Mercedes García-Arenal) on the Moroccan Jewish family of the merchant and diplomat Samuel Pallache (d. 1616) also fits into this development, as does the work by such scholars as Sanjay Subrahmanyan.²

In the intercultural and interreligious dynamics of the Medieval and Early Modern Islamic and European worlds, which have been the focus of an

1. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels. A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Clifford Geertz, “Among the Infidels,” review of N. Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels*, *New York Review of Books* March 23, 2006. See also N. Zemon Davis, “A Life of Learning” (Charles Homer Haskins Lecture, 2017 [ACLS Occasional Paper no. 39, 1997, and online on the ACLS website]).

2. See Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, A Moroccan Jew in Protestant and Catholic Europe*, trans. Martin Beagles, with a foreword by David Nirenberg and Richard Kagan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) Original Spanish edition 1997, translated into Arabic, Italian, Dutch, and Hebrew. Sanjay Subrahmanyan, *Three Ways to be Alien. Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011). See also on the beginnings and later development of globalization Manuel A. Vázquez and David Garbin, “Globalization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 684–701.

important part of the research projects I have had the pleasure to pursue in recent years, prophecies played an important role. Such prophecies were embedded in the dynamics of religion, politics, science and the (esoteric) readings of nature and history. At times apocalyptic in nature, they were used across the existing religious divides, and at other times interpreted polemically between the two sides. The influence of some of these prophecies extends even into the modern and present-day world. An example of this are prophecies about the return of a messianic king to Portugal (Sebastianism), which originated in the death of the Portuguese King Sebastian during a military campaign in sixteenth-century Morocco and continued, in the form of messianic expectations about his return and future kingship, to exercise influence for a long period.³ In the context of the present essay, it must suffice to observe that expectations and dreams about the future of the place we live in, the way it is ruled and our expectation about future social relations, clearly play a role in our behaviour. Prophecies may induce actors either to endure and wait, or to act and move. Important for my conceptual understanding here are Cornell Fleischer's article on prophecies of empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, published in 2018; Stefania Pastore and Mercedes García-Arenal's edited volume on imperial visions and prophecy; Mayte Green-Mercado's recent study on Morisco prophecies,⁴ and the emerging global microhistorical approaches discussed by the historian John-Paul Ghobrial in a recent thematic issue of *Past and Present*.⁵

Not so long ago the Muslim world and Europe were very often discussed in some sort of isolation. At that time we saw book titles such as *Islam and the West*, as if Islam were not a religion in and of the West. Historical developments, but also new approaches in the study of religion and history, have led us to radically rethink such categories. Critiques of Orientalism, colonialism, relationality in the study of religion and the rise of global and entangled history have made us aware that in both the past and the present, Europe and the Middle East were intertwined. An increasing awareness of hitherto unknown connections is also observed and studied by such Ottomanists as Cornell Fleischer: in the seminal article mentioned above he first demonstrates the existence of manifold connections between Europe and Asia in the medieval and Early Modern world of prophecy, and then shows that prophecies in the Muslim world were not identical with the early orthodox

3. Mònica Colominas Aparicio and Gerard Wiegers, "A Moor of Granada: Prophecies as Political Instruments in the Entangled Histories of Spain, Portugal, and the Middle East 16th-18th centuries," *Hamsa* 6 (2019–2020): 2–20. <https://doi.org/10.4000/hamsa.277>

4. Cornell Fleischer, "A Mediterranean Apocalypse: Prophecies of Empire in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (2018): 18–90; Stefania Pastore and Mercedes García-Arenal, eds., *Visiones imperiales y profecía. Roma, España, Nuevo Mundo* (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2018); Mayte Green-Mercado, *Visions of Deliverance. Morisco sand the Politics of Prophecy in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2019). See also Mercedes García-Arenal, "'Un reconfort pour ceux qui sont dans l'attente.' Prophétie et millénarisme dans la péninsule Ibérique et au Maghreb (XVI–XVII siècles)," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 220, no. 4 (2003): 445–86.

5. John-Paul Ghobrial, "Seeing the World like a Microhistorian," *Past and Present* 242, Issue Supplement 14 (November 2019): 1–22.

sources of Islam, but a widespread and lively phenomenon in what he calls “the Age of Prophecy.”

Fleischer shows how Ottoman eschatological prophecies (Ar. *jafr*, Sp. *jofor*) were influenced by works of mystic and esoteric learning (“lettrism”), referring to such scholars as ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Bistāmī, who had a strong influence on the imperial, messianic ideas of Sultan Süleymān (r. 1520–1566). Books of history and prophecy were kept in the palace in the Privy Chamber, and used by the sultans to guide their future political decisions.⁶

A key role in expectations about the messianic age and the end of time was played by judicial astrological notions about the last age of history, and prophesied events such as the conquest of “Rome” (Constantinople) in 1453; some Europeans, such as the French Arabist and esoteric thinker Guillaume Postel (1510–1581), considered these events and prophecies to mean that the Ottoman empire would be the last empire on earth before the imminent eschatological victory of Christianity.⁷ The same held true for the conquest of Granada in 1492, the imposition of confessional unity in Spain, the Protestant Reformations, and the discoveries by Columbus.⁸ Jews and Muslims, as repressed and forcibly converted minorities in the Iberian Peninsula under Hapsburg rule, cherished the hope that the conquest of Constantinople would be a turning point in history, and prophecies circulated among them that bolstered that hope.⁹ These prophecies supported the resilience of the groups and individuals in question. Similar observations can be made about other places. For example, from the recent study by Carolina Lenarduzzi on Catholic life in the Dutch Republic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, after the Protestants’ takeover of power during the Reformation, we learn that the marginalised and persecuted Catholics, the former dominant group, remained resilient: they endured and subtly expressed their beliefs in their material objects and artwork because they cherished the hope and expectation that God was to provide for their future return to power.¹⁰

Let me now take the second step of this essay by presenting the three cases I mentioned at the beginning. I will start with the Granadan Lead Books.

Granada: The Lead Books of the Sacromonte and the Parchment of the Turpiana Tower.

Between 1595 and 1600 in Granada in the south of Spain, Arabic texts written on lead were discovered in caves in Mount Valparaíso, preceded by the

6. Fleischer, “A Mediterranean Apocalypse,” 22, 23; see on Jofores in Spain: Green-Mercado, *Visions of Deliverance*, 3–4, and passim.

7. Fleischer, “A Mediterranean Apocalypse,” 23–25.

8. See Pastore and García-Arenal, *Visiones imperiales y profecía*.

9. Green-Mercado, *Visions of Deliverance*, passim; see on forced conversions: Mercedes García-Arenal and Yonathan Glazer-Eytan, eds., *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Coercion and Faith in Premodern Iberia and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

10. Carolina Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek. De Belevingswereld van een religieuze minderheid, 1570–1750* [Being a Catholic in the Republic. On the Experience of a Religious Minority, 1570–1750] (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2019).

discovery of a prophetic parchment in the former minaret of the Great Mosque in the city centre in 1588.¹¹ The central message of the Parchment was identical with that of the Lead Books, and the same holds true for their authorship.¹² This Parchment and the Lead Books had been inaccessible in the Vatican for 400 years before they were returned to the Sacromonte Abbey in the year 2000. In 2009 my colleague, the late and lamented Sjoerd van Koningsveld, and I received permission from the Archbishop of Granada to edit and translate these books, a project we recently completed.¹³ The Lead Books are a series of twenty-two bound books of thin lead leaves discovered in caves of the said hillock, which is located on the outskirts of the city and was later called the Sacromonte (the Holy Mountain) because of these sacred discoveries. The pseudepigraphic, forged, “early Arab Christian” texts present an inclusive religious message placed in the mouths of the Virgin Mary, Peter, James, and the latter’s Arab disciples Tis’un ibn ‘Atṭār and Cecilio ibn al-Riḏā, who allegedly died as martyrs for their faith in the Iberian Peninsula and whose “ashes” were found there together with the remains of their disciples and companions. Cecilio, it is posited, was the first bishop of Granada. However, the Lead Books, in addition to Christian elements, are also coloured throughout with Muslim notions, such as narratives which deny Jesus’s crucifixion in agreement with Sunni doctrine.¹⁴

Characteristic of the Lead Books is the use in each of them of the so-called Seal of Solomon or Magen David, a magical symbol for Solomon’s domination of the spirits. Here it guarantees the protection of the Lead Books against evil. Other common traits are their so-called Solomonic script, and the repeated formula “All (revealed) books are the truth” (Ar. *kullu kitāb haqq*).¹⁵ This formula is closely connected to another aspect of the Lead Books, their Islamic, mystical message.¹⁶

In many places in the Lead Books we find references to revealed scriptures, starting with the earliest, the Scrolls of Abraham (*Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm*), then the Psalms of David (the *Zabūr*), Moses’s Torah (*Tawrāt*), the Gospel (*sic*, singular as in the Islamic usage, *al-Injīl*), and finally, the *Essence of the Gospel* (*Ḥaqqīqat al-Injīl*). All these together constitute a chain of revelation and prophecy which is entirely Islamic, albeit with a notable turn: the introduction of the *Essence of the Gospel*, which was revealed to Mary and which is the culmination of the chain.¹⁷ Our study of the characteristics ascribed to this scripture in the Lead Book texts shows that it is uncreated (Lead Book

11. See for an overview: Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld and Gerard Albert Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books. Critical Edition of the Arabic Texts and Analysis of the Religious Ideas. Presentation of a Dutch research project, Granada, March 19, 2019. With images of the original Lead Books and the Parchment* (Rijswijk: Avondrood, 2019).

12. Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 36.

13. Pieter Sjoerd Van Koningsveld and Gerard Wiegiers. *The Lead Books of the Sacromonte and the Parchment of the Turpiana Tower: Granada 1588–1606. General Introduction, Critical Edition and Translation* (submitted).

14. Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 36.

15. Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 14–18.

16. Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 31–32.

17. Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 39.

15, fol. 2a) and receives the same epithets as the Qur'an. Therefore it seems to prefigure the Holy Book of Islam and is identical to its core.¹⁸

The (Islamic) central creed of the Lead Books is that 'There is no god but God, and Jesus is the Spirit of God' (Arabic *Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Yaṣū' rūḥ Allāh*). Twenty-one books are written in Arabic, and one, entitled *The Essence of the Gospel* (Ar. *Ḥaḳīqat al-injīl*) is written in a magical script, except for one leaf, which is written in Arabic and contains a doctrinal message about the central saving significance of *The Essence of the Gospel*. This book was said to have descended on Mary, making her the recipient of a sacred book and hence, in Islamic terms, a prophetess.

The Lead Books, the Parchment and accompanying relics were first examined in Granada, initially by a group of Morisco interpreters, and accepted as authentic Christian lore by Granada's Archbishop Pedro de Castro Vaca y Quiñones (1543–1623). Later, against the will of Castro's successors at the Sacromonte Abbey, they were transferred first to Madrid and later to the Vatican; there they were transcribed, translated and interpreted by a group of experts in Oriental languages, among whom were the renowned scholars Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) and Ludovico Maracci (1612–1700).¹⁹

The anonymous authors of the Lead Books can be identified as belonging to the ethnic and religious minority group that was converted under duress, the converted Muslims or Moriscos, these texts being written in secret in the last part of the sixteenth century.²⁰ These Moriscos presented themselves to the outside world as faithful Arabic-speaking Roman Catholic Christians, but they were Muslims, albeit showing all sorts of idiosyncratic beliefs: such as, for example, that Mary was a sinless prophetess to whom a sacred book was revealed.

The discovery of these books caused quite a stir in Europe, in some ways comparable to the stir caused by the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. About 40 years after their arrival in Rome and the process of philological and theological examination, the Lead Books were declared anathema in 1682 by Pope Innocent XI for containing Muslim heresies. They remained in Rome under the vigilance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for 400 years before they were returned by Pope John Paul II in 2000 to their historical owners in Granada, who kindly made them accessible to us for research.

What matters for the present paper is the presence among the Lead Books of various prophecies which predict that the true meaning of the books, in particular of *The Essence of the Gospel* — written, as we have seen, for the

18. Van Koningsveld and Wieggers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 38.

19. See on the evaluation process Carlos Alonso, *Los apócrifos del Sacromonte (Granada): Estudio Histórico* (Valladolid: Estudio Agustiniiano, 1979), and on its wider context of the study of Islam and Arabic in Early Modern Europe: Mercedes García-Arenal and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano, *The Orient in Spain. Converted Muslims, the Forged Lead Books of Granada, and the Rise of Orientalism*, trans. Consuelo López-Morillas (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

20. See on the Moriscos, for example, Leonard Patrick Harvey, *Muslims in Spain, 1500 to 1614* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

greater part in magical script — will remain secret until they will be fully explained “at the end of time” at a council or gathering (the Arabic reads *mujtamaʿ*) to be held under the aegis of a “non-Arab King who will come from the East, with a people eager to rule over Arabs and non-Arabs.” These prophecies and their main characteristics are found in two closely related and partly overlapping books, no. 15, called *Kitāb Tawrīkh ḥaḳīqat al-injīl* (The Book of the History of the Essence of the Gospel) and no. 18, *Kitāb Mawāhib Thawāb Ḥaḳīqat al-Injīl* (The Book of the Gifts of Reward to the Servants of God who Believe in the Essence of the Gospel).²¹ This council will, the Lead Books prophesy, gather at the end of time on the island of Cyprus (Ar. *Subbar*), in a city by the sea, to be conquered by the said non-Arab King from the Venetians;²² and “God will bring the hearts of kings and subjects together, in the East [6b], the West, the South and the North.”²³ During that council, the message of the Lead Books in general and that of *The Essence of the Gospel*, to be explained by a commentator, a modest young Arab, will be accepted. The entire world will convert to the one religion, after which it will soon come to an end. It is clear from the entire corpus of texts that the end of time, heralded by several religious events and signs to be observed in the natural world, was the time in which the said books must have been written, the second half of the sixteenth century, when Cyprus was already under Ottoman rule. It is in this eschatological context that Lead Book 15, The Book of the History of the Essence of the Gospel, fol. 3b, mentions the fact that ‘the *dīn* (this term can be translated as “religion”, GW) will again be a “stranger” (*gharībān*), as it had started its existence’. This is a reference to a well-known Tradition (*Ḥadīth*) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that reads, “that ‘Islam’ (*sic!*) started as a stranger, and will return to being one.” This Tradition originally refers to the earliest Muslims having been a minority in the city of Mecca and an eschatological

21. See Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 42–43. The Arabic text and an English translation of Lead Book 18 can be found in the polemical work of the contemporary Morisco author Aḥmad Ibn Qāsim Al-Ḥajarī, *Kitāb Nāṣir al-Dīn ‘Alā’-l-Qawm al-Kāfirīn* (*The Supporter of Religion against the Infidel*). General introduction, critical edition and annotated translation by Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, Qasim al-Samarrai and Gerard Albert Wiegiers. Reedited, revised, and updated in the light of recent publications and the primitive version found in the hitherto unknown manuscript preserved in Al-Azhar (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2015), 279–94 (translation).

22. Lead Book 15, fol. 8a: “Then Peter said: Tell us at what site the Council will take place, so that we may draw blessing from it [by visiting it]. She [the Virgin Mary] answered: It will be in the Land of the Greeks, on an island in the sea called Subbar, in a city in it, the true name of which is City of the Sea, that is, the city of science, holiness and religion. It [is situated] in the centre of the world between the nations for that purpose. An Arab king will take possession of it from the Venetians, though he is not an Arab [himself], living in the East when this matter comes to an end in that time” (translation in Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Lead Books*, forthcoming, see also Van Koningsveld and Wiegiers, *The Sacromonte Lead Books*, 40–43). For the seventeenth-century Christianizing, Spanish translation of the Lead Books by Adán Centurión, Marquis of Estepa, who was an ardent defender of their authentic Christian character: Miguel José Hagerty Fox, *Los Libros Plumbeos del Sacromonte*. (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1980, republished with Editorial Comares, 1998, 2nd edition, Granada: Editorial Comares, 2007).

23. Lead Book 15, fol. 6a-6b.

return to such a position, which the marginalised and repressed Muslims in Spain interpreted as a reference to themselves. These Muslims, converted to Christianity under duress, are the oppressed ones, and will be rewarded by God on account of their suffering and perseverance. The author of the Lead Book uses *dīn* because it fits his universal claims, while at the same time maintaining a certain ambiguity about the identity of that religion. But since it is clear from the context that the said *Essence of the Gospel* is a reference to the Qur'an, there is no doubt for a Muslim reader and the authors that this true religion is Islam.²⁴ Even though the references to political events are ambiguous, our study of the Arabic texts of the Lead Books indicates that the prophecy very likely refers to the conquest of Cyprus by the Ottomans, which took place in 1571; the city by the sea was perhaps the port city of Famagusta, and the non-Arab king was very likely the Ottoman sultan. There are other passages in the Lead Books that also point to Ottoman influence, such as particular terms and some historical and geographical references. It is, therefore, likely that the authors had a first- or second-hand knowledge of the Ottoman territories. This is not surprising, since relations are known to have existed between Moriscos and the Ottoman regions in this period, as has been studied recently in detail by Tijana Krstić.²⁵

It was Martin Rothkegel who some years ago during a conference in Budapest kindly drew my attention to contacts between Moriscos and Petros Maxilaras, aka Jacobus Palaeologus (1520–1585); his writings and his network represent my second case. Petros Maxilaras was born in the 1520s on the Greek island of Chios (Sakiz), at the time under Genoese rule. Maxilaras was the son of a Greek father and an Italian mother. He was brought up as a Catholic and entered the Dominican order as Frate Jacobo/Giacomo da Scio. He studied in Bologna and Ferrara, went to Pera/Galata (Istanbul) in 1554, and a year later moved to Chios and served as a lecturer in theology. He became a popular preacher. Jacobus Palaeologus was the name he assumed while he studied in Italy, and it suggests that he strongly identified with the Byzantine emperor of the same name. In 1566 Chios was conquered by the Turks. Palaeologus, closely watched by the Roman Inquisition because of his Antitrinitarian propaganda and suspected of being a spy of the Ottoman Empire, was sentenced to death in absentia in 1561 for his radical Antitrinitarian ideas and opposition to the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authorities. In 1585 he was finally put to death in Rome as a heretic.²⁶ A large part

24. See Van Koningsveld and Wieggers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 44–48.

25. See Van Koningsveld and Wieggers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*; Tijana Krstić, "Moriscos in Ottoman Galata, 1609–1620s," in Mercedes Garcia-Arenal and Gerard Wieggers, eds., *The Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain. A Mediterranean Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 269–86; T. Krstić, "The Elusive Intermediaries: Moriscos in Ottoman and Western European Diplomatic Sources from Constantinople, 1560s–1630s," *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, no. 2–3 (2015): 129–51.

26. Martin Rothkegel, "Jacobus Palaeologus in Constantinople, 1554–5 and 1573. Levantine Backgrounds of a Radical Antitrinitarian and his Unsuccessful Reform Attempts," in *Osmanlı İstanbulu*, ed. Feridun M. Emecen, Ali Akyıldız, Emrah Safa Gürkan, IV, (Istanbul, 2016), 977–1004, 985; Juliusz Domański and Lech Szczucki, eds., *Jacobus Palaeologus; Disputatio scholastica* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1994), xvii (introduction by the editors on i–liv).

of Palaeologus's life was devoted to spreading his ideas in both Southern Europe and the Ottoman Empire and to building a network of like-minded persons.

Network

From 1550 s onwards Palaeologus established contacts with Jewish Conversos from Iberia who had settled in Salonika and in Pera/Galata (Beyoğlu). An important figure among these exiles was the Conversa Gracia Mendes-Nasi, a wealthy and very influential merchant lady who had taken up residence in the Istanbul suburb of Pera/Galata. Gracia Mendes-Nasi intervened on Palaeologus's behalf when he found himself in trouble with the Roman Inquisition.²⁷

Palaeologus also maintained contacts with the Latin Christian community, which was, according to the inquisitors, "quite infected with the Lutheran heresy" — which meant, in general, heterodox thought. Palaeologus is also known to have been in contact with Muslims. One of these Muslim contacts is described in the Inquisition sources (to which we owe much recent information about him) as a "Turk" from Spain, who travelled in 1558 with Jacobus from Venice to Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and from there further to Constantinople. The man, described in the records of the Roman Inquisition as a short, Spanish-speaking figure with a brown beard and skin colour, was arrested with a letter by Jacobus in his possession. We are thus very likely dealing with a Morisco. Indeed, the notice points to the existence of contacts with Moriscos that may have continued until the time when Jacobus had fully developed his inclusive religious doctrine. In Pera, in addition to the Converso community there was an Iberian Muslim community from the 1530s onwards.²⁸

Religious Ideas

In his writings Jacobus advanced a new unitarian Christian Creed, which aimed at a radical inclusivist revision of the relation between Christianity and Islam by deemphasising what divided the two religions. It states that "God is one and Jesus is the anointed" (in Latin: *Deum unum esse et Iesum esse Christum*). Jesus is not the incarnation of the Deity, but an elect human being. As Martin Rothkegel argues, Palaeologus consciously formulated this creed in such a way that it is close to the Islamic one and is very similar to the Islamic creed of the Lead Books which we have discussed above.

Palaeologus saw Islam also as form of Christianity uncorrupted by the popes:

This nation has preserved the original Christian liberty more than all other Christian nations that were subject to the tyranny of the popes. Evidence for this

27. M. Rothkegel, "Werdegang des Antitrinitariers Jacobus Paleologus bis 1561," *Acta Comeniana* 26 (2012): 7–68, 60.

28. Krstić, "The Elusive Intermediaries."

is their purer doctrine of the oneness of God, and that they do not consider Jesus Christ to be of divine nature [...] Their temples, public places and private homes are free from pictures and statues of saints or other images. [...] They pray in public and private to the One God, not to saints, prophets or others [...] As I said before, they are Christians as their faith shows, for they believe that Jesus is the Christ.²⁹

Hence, Palaeologus calls Muslims “Turkish Christians” (*Turci Christiani*). But Palaeologus also aims to include in his reforms the Jews, namely, Jewish Conversos. In his aforesaid treatise *About the Three Nations* (1572), Palaeologus writes that neither circumcision nor observance of Jewish ritual law endangers the eternal salvation of Christians, on condition that they profess Jesus as the Messiah.³⁰ He also includes the Jews, provided they are prepared to concede to Jesus the title “Anointed.”³¹ This can be seen as an attempt to include Jews in the unified reform movement he envisaged. His reform project can be seen as intended to serve as a base for an enduring peaceful coexistence of two empires under two emperors, the House of Hapsburg in the West and the Ottomans in the East.

His *Scholastic Disputation* is a highly original work of prophetic imagination which he left unfinished, as we will see below, either on purpose or, perhaps, because he had to flee persecution.³² In this work, dating from about 1574–1575, Palaeologus claims to have had a prophetic dream or vision of an assembly: religious scholars from all nations and periods of history meet for a Universal Council convoked by the president of the assembly of celestials, Patrotheos, God Himself, the Divine Father. A meeting follows in which “all mortals” are convened; it is sponsored by a figure called Maximus Aemilius (in whom we recognise the Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian II) and a figure called Josias (a reference to the Antitrinitarian Prince John Sigismund of Transylvania) on the one hand, and the sultans Soliman, Selim and Murad on the other. It takes place in the superterrestrial city of Ianopolis, modelled after the heavenly Jerusalem. The figure of Soliman (Süleyman), in particular, is pictured in a very favourable way, possibly based on the very positive way the historical Süleyman treated Sigismund during a historical discussion about the Trinity which took place in 1556. In this prophetic vision it is implicitly suggested that the council rehabilitates Palaeologus and the martyrs who have been killed for witnessing the monotheist truth. The council confirms the monotheist, unitarian creed. The persecutors are punished. We recognise Michele Ghislieri (1504–1572), the Grand Inquisitor and later Pope Pius V, the chief persecutor of Palaeologus himself, one of the many autobiographical elements in the text.

29. Rothkegel, “Jacobus Palaeologus in Constantinople, 1554–5 and 1573,” 980, trans. M. Rothkegel.

30. Rothkegel, “Jacobus Palaeologus in Constantinople, 1554–5 and 1573,” 993.

31. Rothkegel, “Jacobus Palaeologus in Constantinople, 1554–5 and 1573,” 981.

32. On purpose: see Palaeologus, *Disputatio scholastica*, xvi. See on Cusanus’s *De Pace Fidei* as the model of the *Disputatio*: Domański and Szczucki, *ibid.*, xlv.

It seems very likely that, as Domański and Szczucki suggest, the model of this work was *On the Peace of the Faith* (*De Pace Fidei*) written by Nicolas of Cusa in 1453, which also deals with a concord of all religions to be concluded in a future Jerusalem. Further, the *Scholastic Disputation* ends suddenly with the announcement of a speech by Nicholas of Cusa (which, in the unfinished text, does not follow). Let us now briefly turn to Cusa and his *On the Peace of the Faith*.

Nicholas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa was a very well-known Catholic theologian and cardinal who facilitated the negotiations between the Roman Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox Churches at the council of Ferrara/Florence (1438–1439), and is known to have developed an inclusive theory about the unity of both groups. After the fall of Constantinople, he also developed a religious theory — quite inclusive for that period — that had universal pretensions. In his work *On the Peace of the Faith*, written shortly after the conquest of Constantinople, he imagines a vision of a person. This person, Cusanus himself, had been carried off (Latin: *raptus*) to Heaven to meet with seventeen deceased wise men; these represent all (symbolic for universal) different religions and ethnicities. They [the seventeen] discuss a concord of all religions (Lat. *religiones*) in a dialogue with the Word (*verbum*) in a way that is reminiscent of the scenes evoked in the Scholastic Disputation. Cusanus's main ideas are expressed as *religio una in varietate rituum* (“one ‘religion’ in a plurality of rites”) and *una sit Religio*, with a strong Neoplatonic background. Cusanus puts the famous expression in the mouth of the Arab sage, one of the seventeen sages, who are all from different “nations.” According to Stünckel, Cusanus's most representative position on the notion of *religio* is expressed in a jussive form, namely *una sit religio* (i.e., “there *should be* one religion”), elsewhere in *De Pace Fidei*.³³ As Biechler argues, it is very likely that Cusa took this famous expression from a medieval polemical Islamic text called *Kitāb masā'il 'Abdallāh ibn Salām* (the Book of Questions of 'Abdallāh ibn Salām), which was translated from Arabic into Latin by Herman of Dalmatia in the twelfth century as *Doctrina Mahumet*. In particular, it echoes a saying attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad: “The law or faith of all is one, but the rites of the different prophets were undoubtedly different.”³⁴ Biechler points

33. Knut Stünckel, *Una Sit Religio. Religionsbegriffe and Begriffstopologien bei Cusanus, Lull und Maimonides* (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 91.

34. J. Biechler, “A New Face towards Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia,” in G. Christiansen and T. M. Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 191–200, 196. See for an excellent recent edition of this text, which is part of the Corpus Cluniacense: Ulisse Ceccini, ed., *Masā'il 'Abdallāh ibn Salām (Doctrina Mahumet). Kritische Edition des arabischen Textes mit Einleitung und Übersetzung. Mit einem Anhang zur lateinischen Doctrina Mahumet von Concetta Finiello und Reinhold Gleit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021). The aforesaid passage is found on pp. 194 (Latin text) and 195 (German translation). See also Jacob Langeloh, *Der Islam auf dem Konzil von Basel (1431–1449). Eine Studie mit Editionen und Übersetzungen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Johannes van Ragusa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019).

out that Cusanus's manuscript of the *Doctrina Muhamet* also included the statement *una est igitur religio et cultus omnium intellectu vigentium, quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur* ("So the religion and worship of all those who are intellectually alive is one, and it is presupposed in all the diversity of rites"), and, still elsewhere, as a gloss in the same text.³⁵ Biechler also points out that Cusa stipulates that the Qur'an contains fundamental truths of the Gospel, and is therefore implicitly Trinitarian, pointing to the expression of Jesus as 'ruholla', that is, Ar. *Rūḥ Allāh* "A Spirit from God." This is one of the ways Jesus is identified in the Qur'an, and it reappears in the Lead Books, as we have seen above. Other passages in Cusa's *De Pace Fidei* which deal with diversity versus unity (upon the conquest of Constantinople) state that persecution occurred as a result of a diversity of rites, *quae ob diversum rituum religionum*.³⁶ I would argue that there are other notions in *De Pace Fidei* which suggest that he was influenced by Islamic ideas in even more respects. For example, he writes that God has sent prophets to all peoples, a notion very close to Islamic ideas about the continuity of prophethood.³⁷ Cusanus sees a principal role for the popes in discussing religious truths with the Muslims, while the conciliarist Juan de Segovia sees a role for both civil and religious authorities.³⁸

Comparative Analysis

There are many common elements between Jacobus's message and those of the authors of the Lead books: similar inclusive "unitarian" creeds, and a strongly prophetic, utopian expectation of the coming into being of a single religious and/or political community. They also have in common the material context of the council, in contrast with the heavenly meeting of Cusa, which takes place "outside" such a "material" context. The authors saw themselves as standing in a long line of martyrs for the Truth. These similarities are perhaps not a coincidence, since we have seen that Spanish Conversos and Moriscos were part of

35. Biechler, "A New Face towards Islam," 197, note 35: "fides una, ritus diversus."

36. Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei: De pace fidei: cum Epistula ad Joannem de Segobia*, Raymond Klibansky and Hildebrand Bascour, eds. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959), fol. 114r, 3.

37. See Nikolaus von Cusa, *Von Frieden zwischen den Religionen*. Lateinisch-Deutsch. Herausgegeben und übersetzt von Klaus Berger und Christiane Nord (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 2002), 43.

38. Biechler, "A New Face towards Islam," 192, 194. On Cusa's Neoplatonism (the created cosmos as unfolding of the truth) see *ibid.*, 196. See on *De Pace fidei* also John Tolan, "De pace fidei," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600–1500*, General Editor David Thomas. https://doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_COM_25919 (accessed August 18, 2021): "The work is very unlike earlier fictitious dialogues in which Jews, Christians and Muslims argue about doctrinal or ritual differences, in that here the emphasis is on the unity of belief and purpose among the sages. Their faith and religion are one, under a diversity of rites (*una religio in rituum varietate*), and the capacity to understand this unity and to respect the diversity has the potential to lead to a greater understanding of God and the achievement of peace among people of different religions. This statement on rites seems clearly inspired by Islamic notions." See on this also Pim Valkenberg, "Una Religio in Rituum Varietate. Religious Pluralism, the Qur'an, and Nicholas of Cusa," in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam. Polemic and Dialogue in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković and Donald Duclow (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 30–48.

Jacobus's world, and that he was in contact with them in Dubrovnik and Istanbul. But there are some differences as well. While both prophetic visions have a clear political outlook, Palaeologus aims at a political concord between the Ottomans and the Transylvanian and Hapsburg kings, in which Unitarian, Antitrinitarian ideas play a dominant role.

The Lead Books also present a 'Unitarian' outlook, which is permeated by and culminates in Islamic ideas that focus politically and messianically on the Ottoman rulers. These ideas are also marked by mystical notions such as we find in the works of Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240 CE) which circulated in the Ottoman Empire, that is, his notion of the Unity of Being.³⁹ In this regard, the ideas of the Lead Books are closer to the mystical Neoplatonic notions of Cusanus than to Paleologus's *Scholastic Dispute*.

I have so far discussed the Lead Book prophecies in comparison with those of Palaeologus in the Early Modern Mediterranean world, and we have seen how these eschatological prophecies of empire are entangled with other social domains such as politics, law, economics, and science. Imperial aspirations become imbued with religion, and eschatological messianic pretensions allow for political aspirations. The circulation and coming into being of these prophecies flourished between the Ottoman Empire, the Maghrib and Europe in an atmosphere of radical change and crisis. This crisis was felt by many, including Nicholas of Cusa.⁴⁰ In these prophecies, the conquest of Constantinople as the second Rome played, as we have seen, a very important role. Some of these prophecies predicted the end of the world, preceded by a period in which the whole world would unite. Unity and universalism, under the guidance of a wise messianic ruler, provided a way out of the crisis and the feeling of oppression. I surmise, with Stünckel, that under the influence of events and conscious of the consequences of the fall of Constantinople, Nicholas of Cusa developed his notion of "one" *religio* and a diversity of rites as a first expression of a metaposition towards the concept of *religio*. But I also suggest that Cusanus adopted some important Islamic, inclusive notions. Whether Palaeologus responded directly to such messianic ideas remains to be studied, but in any case, it seems highly likely that he knew Cusa's work and responded to it in his own, Unitarian way. Moreover, as we have seen, such ideas were not uniquely Christian. We find a similar religious ideas and prophecies in the Islamic, albeit idiosyncratic, Lead Books.

Implications for the Study of Religion/s

Religious contact and its implications for theories of comparison in the study of religion is a theme to which Volkhard Krech and Niels Reeh have

39. See Van Koningsveld and Wiegers, *The Sacromonte Parchment and Lead Books*, 31–32.

40. As also noted by Stünckel, *Una Sit Religio*, 90.

contributed in their recent research. In one of his articles, Reeh elaborates on interreligious relations as a new point of departure for comparative theory.⁴¹ He criticises Smith for his well-known statement that there are no data for religion, and posits that instead of starting from issues of defining religion we should acknowledge that religions, ever since the coming into being of Mosaic distinction (the notion introduced by Jan Assmann⁴²), *recognise* other religions, either by cooperating or by competing (for the truth) in a (global) religious field. Religions, he argues, can be seen as “survival units” (a term taken from Norbert Elias’s sociological work) and we should theorise from that starting point, abandoning an etic definition.⁴³

The perspective Reeh offers is a good step forward, but falls short, it seems to me, as a metaapproach, narrowing the focus too much to an emic approach/object language. Reeh does not see that Smith’s famous remark that there are no data for religion should be read against the background of Smith’s distinction between analogical and genealogical approaches used in the metalanguage of the study of religion, such as we find it, for example, in his *Drudgery Divine*.⁴⁴ There Smith argues that the relationships between empirical phenomena are to a much larger extent in the eye of the beholder in the case of analogical comparison than in a genealogical way of comparing. Genealogy implies the existence of notions of causality and influence, while such causal relations cannot be established in a case of analogical comparison. Hence, we require a scholarly metalanguage in which religion needs to be defined. It is in this metasense that religion does not exist outside the academy.

While I agree (and my theory and empirical data confirm this) that a *relational approach* to religion is what we need, it seems to me that Krech’s theoretical position regarding relationality offers the best way.⁴⁵ Relationality as such should be placed at the heart of empirical research and process. Constituting religious fields vis-à-vis other social spheres, a dynamic network of

41. Niels Reeh, “Inter-Religious Relations as a New Foundation for Comparative Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 32 (2020): 47–73; Niels Reeh, “Interreligious Conflict, Translation, and the Usage of the Early Modern Notion of ‘Religion’ from the Fall of Constantinople to the Westphalian Peace Treaty in 1648,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13 (2020): 96–120.

42. For example Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

43. Reeh, “Inter-Religious Relations as a New Foundation for Comparative Religion,” 58.

44. Jonathan Z. Smith, “On Comparison,” in id., *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 50–53. The passage in question reads as follows: “That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experience and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholars’ study. It is created for the scholar’s analytical purpose by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study”: in J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), ix.

45. Volkhard Krech, “Relational Religion: Manifesto for a Synthesis in the Study of Religion,” *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 97–105.

relations emerges through the interplay between semantics, social structures, mental processes and material conditions. Religion, Krech argues, is not a *priori* category, but an autopoietic and self-referential entity. Thus religion, according to Krech, “*itself* [italics in the original, GW] establishes by drawing relations to its environment from which it differentiates.”⁴⁶ This implies that religions do not relate to other religions *only* and that, hence, in the study of religion we need a concept of religion formulated on an etic, object-language level.

In my comparative analysis of the works of Palaeologus and the Lead Books, with the work of Cusa as an (emic–etic) *tertium comparationis*, the commonalities we have discovered between the religious discourse/language of prophecy found in the Lead Books and the work of Jacobus Palaeologus are so far mainly *analogical*, even though future research might provide us with more conclusive evidence of a *genealogical* connection between the different ideas and discourses. In this respect, it is interesting to observe that while the discourse in both cases owes a lot to religion, it also offers insight into other aspects on which, for reasons of space, I cannot elaborate here, such as that of parody and play, of invention and of imagination (I refer here to the notion of fictional religion)⁴⁷, but also of politics, that is, the political goals that both the authors of the Lead Books and Palaeologus aimed to achieve. What we may have concluded in any case is that the Lead Book prophecies about an eschatological council on the one true religion between Islam, Christianity and Judaism were probably part of a much larger social network of agents and ideas in which prophecies were read and understood.

In all these respects, as has been pointed out by various researchers, we should consider shifts taking place in this period and in this area of religious and political contact. I have already mentioned that in Cusa’s *De Pace Fidei* we seem to witness the beginnings of the use of the concept “religion” as term in a (scholarly) metalanguage. Cusa’s wise men in heaven discuss religion and ritual as if they were detached from the material world. The religious imagination is used to picture idealised councils in which a future universal ‘religion’ is at stake, something very similar to the collective singular use of the term. Gleis and Reichmuth saw that it was in this period that the Arabic term *dīn* started to be translated as *religio* (instead of the previously much more common and pejorative *lex*) in one of Nicholas of Cusa’s other works, the *Sifting of the Qur’an (Cribratio Alcorani)* of 1460.⁴⁸ Of course, Latin texts written by a learned man do not reflect the dynamics of social life and lived religious experience. It is important to note that these changes in the use of the concept *religio* can be dated to between the middle of the

46. Krech, “Relational Religion,” 99.

47. See researchers such as Carole Cusack: for example, Steven J. Sutcliffe and Carole M. Cusack, “Introduction. Making it All Up. Invented Religions and the Study of “Religion”,” *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 353–61.

48. Reinhold Gleis and Stefan Reichmuth, “Religion between Last Judgement, Law and Faith: Koranic *dīn* and its Rendering in Latin translations of the Koran,” *Religion* 42, no. 2 (2012): 247–71.

fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, and hence earlier than hitherto assumed by many scholars of religion. These discursive shifts can be connected to the increasing intensity of the interreligious and intercultural contacts between the Ottoman Empire and Europe, and especially to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. I would say that the blossoming field of historical, philological, European and Middle Eastern studies about the Medieval, Early Modern and later periods attests to a more fruitful dialogue between history and the academic study of religion than Mattias Brand assumes, and that the observed trends in history in the form of global and entangled (micro)history demonstrate a much larger generalising tendency than he posits. These approaches offer a very interesting venue for the Study of Religion/s, as they imply a methodological approach that is grounded in both a local context and a wider contextual and even global scale, and provide opportunities for the use of social scientific and anthropological theory.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Data subject to third party restrictions.