

Nicholas of Cusa, Francis of Assisi, and interreligious dialogue

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Tom Izbicki and I co-wrote an article titled “Nicholas of Cusa and the Ottoman Threat to Christendom.” It argues that Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) had a long-time interest in the possibility of dialogue with Muslims, as demonstrated in his irenic *De pace fidei* (1453), but over the years gradually moved away from dialogue toward supporting a crusade against the Ottoman Turks. His harsh polemical *Cribratio Alkorani* (1461) and some of his sermons can be considered the literary expressions of this change of mind. We submitted our manuscript to *Medieval Encounters*, and the peer review process resulted in acceptance (forthcoming soon), but with an objection to our use of the term “interreligious dialogue”^[1] because the term is a modern one and did not exist in 15th century Europe nor in Cusanus’ lexicon, nor is the phenomenon (interreligious dialogue) older than its name.

While this was reviewer 2, reviewer 1 suggested a bibliographical improvement and recommended using a few additional publications, *inter alia*, a recent study by Kate Waggoner Karchner.^[2] This study concludes that, following Riccoldo da Montecroce’s *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, Cusanus’ *Cribratio* attempted to create an interreligious dialogue – the term is at the core of her paper. Accordingly, while Cusanus supported the crusade planned by Pope Pius II, “he focused his efforts and his writings much more intently on finding a dialogic way for Christians to approach Islam than on promoting crusades directly. Both churchmen [Pope Pius II and Cardinal Cusanus], seem to have seen dialogue as a more productive approach to Islam...”^[3]

The reviewers’ contradictory remarks created a confusing situation: on the one hand, we faced a demand to rule out “interreligious dialogue” as anachronistic; on the other hand, we were recommended to rely on, or at least use, a study that has “interreligious dialogue” at its heart. What to do in such a case? First, let us clear up “interreligious dialogue.”

In 1964, in formulating the famous *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Paul VI instituted a department of the Roman Curia in charge of relations with other religions. This department has later become the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID)*. Its responsibilities were set “to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of others religious traditions; to encourage the study of religions; to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.” Most significantly, the council stipulated that “Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment.”^[4] I kindly request my readers to think of Cusanus’ *Cribratio Alkorani*, or even *De pace fidei*, and ponder whether they fit in.

Similarly, in the research literature, we find definitions explicitly emphasizing the need “to listen, to hear the words of the other. Here dialogue points in a direction very different from that of the dominant approach to interreligious relations in the past, which was the will to have the other hear oneself.”^[5] The goals of interreligious dialogues may differ, “from peaceful coexistence to social change, and from mutual understanding to actual religious growth. But the common denominator in all these forms of inter-religious engagement is mutual respect and openness to the possibility of learning from the other.”^[6]

However, as the Vatican clarified, interreligious dialogue is not a new conversion method to Christianity.^[7] Attempts to make anyone abandon his religion and convert to another religion cannot be considered part of a dialogue; preaching to convince non-Christians to convert to Christianity – no matter how peacefully conducted – cannot be considered interreligious dialogue. Missionary activities are out of scope: “It is forbidden to enter dialogue with the intention or desire of converting one’s partner. People participating in dialogue don’t want to be converted... dialogue is fundamentally incompatible with mission.”^[8]

The editors of *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam* (2014) were sincere enough to admit that enlightened as Cusanus’ and John of Segovia’s initiatives concerning Islam were, “they look conflicted, since conversion to Christianity remained a key aim for the proposed conference and translation. Nicholas himself died while traveling to join Pope Pius II’s launch of another crusade.”^[9] Religious reciprocity, and certainly not equality, do not exist even in Cusanus’ moderate and irenic work, *De pace fidei*. This is true even when Christian superiority is phrased by Cusanus’ impressive slogan, “One religion in a variety of rituals.”^[10] It is not “One God in a variety of religions,” it is about Christianity as the one religion, albeit “a toned-down Christianity,” as Tom Izbicki puts it. Consequently, using the term “interreligious dialogue” not just about Cusanus’ polemical *Cribratio* but also for his irenic *De pace fidei* is out of place and should be avoided.

In the history of Medieval Christian-Muslim relations, the closest thing to what we call today “interreligious dialogue” was probably Francis of Assisi’s encounter with Sultan of

Egypt Al-Malik Al Kamil. In September 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, friar Francis met with the Egyptian Sultan in northern Egypt in a tent near the town of Damietta on the Nile delta. According to some, the accounts of contemporaneous sources relating to this meeting are incomplete and partisan; according to some, the monk wished to instruct the Sultan in the right way and convert him to Christianity. Francis also prepared himself for the possibility of dying as a martyr.[11]

Reportedly, Francis did not suffer any harm. On the contrary, the Sultan received him with respect, and when the meeting ended, he respectfully sent him away. The encounter between the two is often considered, by sources and modern writers, as an interfaith encounter conducted in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. The Sultan rejected his interlocutor's attempts to persuade him to convert to Christianity. The special figure of Francis, peace-loving and faithfully representing evangelical Christianity, stands out in this encounter. As a rule, the image of the Sultan conveys sincerity and respect to his interlocutor, his sermons, and the principles of the Christian-evangelical morality that he allegedly expressed.

However, this engagement, whatever its true content was, should not be defined as inter-religious dialogue. The contemporary concept of interreligious dialogue did not exist at the time: "In the Middle Ages, true dialogues between Islam and Christianity were extremely rare, and, if we mean by that such dialogues as we think desirable, simply nonexistent." [12] Appeasing and tolerant as this encounter allegedly was, it assumedly purposed to instruct the Muslim in the Christian way and to make him convert to Christianity. Thus, there was no religious reciprocity or pluralism, certainly no equality, in this engagement. Essentially, the initiator of this meeting acted as a missionary trying to convince his interlocutor to give up his religion, Islam, and adopt the true one, Christianity. Therefore, titles such as "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue" [13] should not be taken at face value.

Indeed, Francis's irenic peace-pursuing sermon to the Crusaders - again, much depends on biased sources - and his engagement with the Sultan may well demonstrate a change in Christian outlook. Also, Francis's call to Christians and Muslims for a peaceful reconciliation should be much appreciated.[14] However, since this peace was to be achieved only if the Muslims were to abandon their faith and convert to Christianity, Francis's engagement with the Sultan should not be considered interreligious dialogue.

Victor Tolan reviewed and analyzed the various representations, literary and artistic, of this encounter over the generations, from the 13th century to the 20th century. Not for nothing has Tolan avoided using "interreligious dialogue" or "interfaith dialogue" in his comprehensive study.[15] However, be the exact contents of this encounter as it may, it was certainly a non-polemical one, which cannot be said about Cusanus' *Cribratio Alkorani*. Furthermore, while in Francis' writings there is no trace of a call for crusade,[16] Cusanus' involvement,

on Pope Pius II' side, to set a crusade against the Turks in motion stands out in contrast to Francis's pursuit of peace.[17]

References

[1] The term “interreligious dialogue” is used throughout this paper rather than “interfaith dialogue.” However, these terms are identical and interchangeable, and both are at stake here.

[2] Kate Waggoner Karchner, “Deciphering the Qur’an in late medieval Europe: Riccoldo da Montecroce, Nicholas of Cusa and the text-centered development of interreligious dialogue,” *Journal of Medieval History* 46 (2020), 156-178. Some more researchers link Cusanus to “interreligious dialogue.” Maarten Halff, “Did Nicholas of Cusa Talk With Muslims? Revisiting Cusanus’ Sources For The *Cribratio Alkorani* and Interfaith Dialogue,” *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval*, 26 (2019): 29-58, referring to Cusanus’ visit in Constantinople in 1437, axiomatically assumes that the *Cribratio* is an attempt at interreligious dialogue. He argues that Cusanus relied on a merchant of Venice who allegedly served as an inspiration for Cusanus’ idea that laypeople could play a critical role in interreligious dialogue. Marica Costigliolo, “The interreligious dialogue in *de docta ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa,” *Medieval Encounters* 20 (2014), 217-237, shows how *De pace fidei* is methodically and philosophically linked to Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia* using the so-called coincidence of opposites. But Costigliolo does not refer to the different nature of the *Cribratio*, nor did she draw attention to the military-historical circumstances that affected Cusanus and stimulated his anti-Ottoman crusading spirit. Vim Valkenberg, “Una Religio in Rituum Varietate: Religious Pluralism, the Qur’an, and Nicholas of Cusa,” in I. Ch. Levy, R. George-Tvrtković and D. Duclow (eds.) *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 35: “we meet here an eschatological vision of interreligious harmony”; Erich Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*, trans. Crouner, D. and Christianson G. (Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 130: “Sifting the Qur’an (*Cribratio Alkorani*) presents similar thoughts [to *De pace fidei*].” John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 90, attributes Cusanus an essentially positive approach toward Islam.

[3] Waggoner Karchner, “Deciphering the Qur’an in late medieval Europe,” 177.

- [4] The citations are taken from the Vatican official website: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html (under the subtitle *A. Nature and Goals of PCID*). The PCID does not deal with Christian-Jewish relations. Another pontifical body deals with these.
- [5] S. B. King, “Interreligious Dialogue,” in Chad Meister (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.
- [6] Catherine Cornille, “introduction,” in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious dialogue* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
- [7] (under the subtitle *B. Methodology of PCID*).
- [8] King, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 106.
- [9] Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković, Donald F. Duclow (eds.) *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 2.
- [10] Hopkins, 635; *De pace fidei*, I, 7, 10-15: “... et cognoscent omnes quomodo non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate.”
- [11] John V. Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Gerard Pieter Freeman, “Francis of Assisi and the Sultan: Deviance and Normalization,” *Religion & Theology* 23 (2016) 57–75; Kathleen Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek al-Kamil* (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2003); Jan Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press, 1997).
- [12] Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi’s Mission of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 141; Rémi Brague, *The Legend of the Middle Ages*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 202.
- [13] Laurent Gallant, “Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Franciscan Studies* 64 (2006), 53-82.
- [14] Poul Rout, *St Francis of Assisi and Islam: A Theological Perspective on a Christian-Muslim Encounter*,” *Al-Masāq. Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* 23 (2011), 205-215 (p. 215).
- [15] The term “ecumenical dialogue” appears sporadically in Tolan’s book, but always to

display a notion attributed to Francis not by Tolan himself but by others, such as Pope John Paul II (see pp. 314-315).

[16] Hoeberichts, *Francis*, 4.

[17] On Cusanus' involvement in setting the crusade in motion, see: Norman Housley, "Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Crusade: Conciliar, Imperial, and Papal Authority," *Church History* 86 (2017): 643-667; Thomas M. Izbicki, "Juan De Torquemada, Nicholas of Cusa and Pius II on the Islamic Promise of Paradise," *Revista Espanola de Filosofia Medieval*, 26 (2019), 107; Nathan Ron "Erasmus' attitude toward Islam in light of Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*," *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* 26 (2019): 128-129.