The notion of Islam as “Heresy” in Peter the Venerable’s Writings in the Historical Frame of the Conflict between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Age

La concezione dell’Islam come “eresia” negli scritti di Pietro il Venerabile nella cornice storica del conflitto tra il mondo cristiano e musulmano nel Medioevo

Sabrina Lei

Tawasul International
Centre for Publishing, Research and Dialogue

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-9955

Article Information

Citation: Lei, Sabrina. “The notion of Islam as 'Heresy' in Peter the Venerable’s Writings in the Historical Frame of the Conflict between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Age”. International Research Journal of Islamic Civilization 1/1 (2021): 1-33.
The notion of Islam as “Heresy” in Peter the Venerable’s Writings in the Historical Frame of the Conflict between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Age

Sabrina Lei

Abstract

Peter the Venerable’s apologetic writings against Islam did not constitute a problematic document, as some scholars seem to suggest, related to a new style of approach to the Muslim world intended both as separate and opposite to the strictly military one, but could be instead interpreted as an ideological justification of a kind of “intellectual crusade” conducted by the clergy and rooted, according to the intention of the Abbot of Cluny, on a supposed “objective” knowledge of Islam. The composition of these texts is situated in the general frame of the Reconquista (722-1492) of the territories under the Islamic power by the Christian armies, having been written at the core of this historical process. Although some passages seem to manifest a wider pastoral interest, as addressed to the Muslim world as such, however a careful reading of the texts suggests a different interpretation. Actually, the writings of Peter the Venerable should be understood as a programmatic intellectual project aiming at the conversion of Muslims living in the territories reconquered by the Christian monarchs and, at the same time, at preserving the Christian populations from converting to Islam. The texts’ ideologi-
The notion of Islam as “Heresy”

cal frame is rooted in the notion of Islam as an “heresy” which, beyond a strict theological perspective, define the ideological asset of the Catholic Church in the midst of the struggle for the spiritual and consequentially political supremacy of the Christian world after the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the idea of Latinitas Cristiana, at the core of the notion of Europe as a singular political reality, as intended and promoted by the Papacy.

**Keywords:** Peter the Venerable, Crusaders, Reconquista, History of Christianity, Quran’ Latin translation.

Towards the end of the first half of the XII century, Peter the Venerable\(^1\), then Abbot of the monastery of Cluny, therefore at its pick of influence in the Christian world due to its relation with Papacy and the strong bonds with the European monarchs, started writing two documents entitled *Summa totius haeresis saracenorum* (On the whole heresy of the Saracens) and *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim saracenorum* (Against the Heretic Sect of the Saracens), respectively.

However, the importance of the writings of Peter the Venerable does not lie strictly in their theological value, which from a contemporary approach appears quite super-

---

\(^1\) Aka Pierre Maurice de Montboissier (1092-1156), from a prominent family and grandnephew of Hugh I, Abbot of Cluny from 1049 to 1109, become Abbot at the young age of twenty-eight. He started his education in the monastery of Sauxillanges. After having served as prior in the monasteries of Vézelay and Domène, was elected as Abbot of Cluny, a role he covered until his death. The Abbey of Cluny, a French location between Lion and Dion, played a very prominent role in the cultural and political life of the time, especially in the period between the beginning of X and the second half of the XII century. The Abbey has been founded in 910 by William of Aquitania, but it reached its peak between the XI and the beginning of XII century. James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 3-14.
ficial due to the lack of an objective and adequate knowledge of Islam as a religion and civilization. From another perspective, instead, the scholar could find the same texts extremely interesting since they clearly illustrate the kind and nature of the knowledge Christian theologians had of Islam in the Middle Age and, at the same time, represent a fundamental document for studying the main features of Medieval Christianity in the process of the political construction of European identity with regard to the Muslim world.

In fact, even if Peter the Venerable’s work could be situated among the Christian apology from a strictly theological perspective, at the same time, it could be studied and interpreted also as a direct evidence emerging from the medieval political and social environment, in relation to the conflict between Christianity and Islamic world in the historical frame of the Crusades and the *Reconquista*. These texts testified, in fact, the existence of a paradigm regarding the relation between Christianity and heresy, which is situated at the core of the ongoing process of the construction of European identity, where both political and religious powers were in the constant research of a balance from the sides of internal and foreign policy, respectively.

However, in order to understand these documents as a whole it is necessary, even before studying them in the detail, to provide an answer to the following key issues: the historical context of their composition and their scope. The value of these writings could be understood from both the theological and historical perspectives only taking all these factors into the due consideration.

Historically, the *terminus post quem* of the work is 1142-1143, a timeframe in which are located two important moments of the relation between Christian and Islamic world. At the end of the XI century, in fact, the
Islamic and Christian civilizations were engaged in the middle of a conflict in several parts of the world: in south Italy, in Andalusia, Anatolia and the Holy Land. Generally speaking, the Christian world was actively engaged in warfare with the Muslim world to regain the territories previously lost to the Islamic power.

In the 1142 Peter the Venerable travelled to Spain\(^2\) in order to look after some interests of the local Christian community, to promote the Liturgical reform\(^3\) aiming at unifying the religious practices of the local churches and to encounter the monarch Alphonso VII, with whom the Cluniac order shared a very close relation and who invited him to discuss several issues related also to the economic situation of Cluny. Alphonso VI, in fact, conceded to the Abbey of Cluny a considerable donation, which was of vital importance for the Abbey. At the time of Alphonso VII, however, the same donation suffers several delays, and the Abbot of Cluny tried to solve the issue for the general interest of the Cluniac order and to strengthen, at the same time, the relation with the victorious monarch. Alphonso VII, in fact, in the 1085 re-conquered from the Muslim power the city of Toledo, where the ecclesiastical authorities established an archbishopric and as an archbishop was chosen by the Pope Urban II precisely a monk from the Cluniac order.


\(^3\)The standardization of the liturgy was promoted and patronized by the Cluniac order and, as regard the Christian community residing in Spanish territories was aimed mainly at the “correction” of the liturgical and worship practices of the Mozarab Christians who, for centuries, lived under the Muslim political power. The liturgical practices of the Mozarabs have been finally abolished in 1080, during the Council of Burgos. The representatives of the Cluniac order actually introduced the Roman rite among the Christians of Spain.
The monasteries of the Cluniac order, which Peter was going to visit and where he intended to stay during his visit to Spain, were located in the Eber valley, in the strip of land between the Pyrenees and the homonymous river. This area, during the XII century, had been a place of encounter and warfare between the Muslim and Christian powers. Here, in fact, for almost three centuries, the Muslim and Christian armies confronted each other on the battlefield. While in Spanish territory, the Abbot of Cluny had the chance of experiencing directly the danger posed for Christians by Islam that won a large number of converts from the Catholic Church as the history of Andalusia of that time clearly demonstrates. According to some historians, in fact, in the X century the majority of the Christians of Andalusia converted to Islam. Part of them become client or affiliate of the Arab tribes and families. However, the majority of converts, who did not enjoy any bond with the Arab families, were known as muwalladun and constitute, according to some scholars, a separate social group which did not fall in any category previously known in the Islamic world. Catholicism, instead, continued to be professed in the main cities and the surrounding areas, where there was an Episcopal chair, while Christian communities seem to have been disappeared in the Eastern and central parts of Andalusia and in the Eber valley mainly due to the lack of pastoral care and the

---


5 It seems that the term “muwalla” has been used only in Andalusia.
The notion of Islam as “Heresy”

S. Lei

subsequent conversion to Islam. In the same area, after the victory of Christian armies, began also the process of study and progressive transmission of the technical and scientific heritage of the Islamic civilization preserved in the rich libraries, where were stored and in custody not only the works written in Andalusia but also those composed in the rest of the Muslim world.  

The process of transmission of the Islamic knowledge to the Christian world was promoted and fostered by the attentive and tireless work of translators -very often of Jewish or Mozarab origin- who engaged themselves actively in the transmission of the Arabic texts in the Latin language. In the city of Toledo, between 1125 and 1151, the archbishop Raymond founded a school of translation, which has been converted in 1250 by the Dominican Fathers into a Centre of Oriental Studies, the first one founded in the West.  

The main books chosen to be translated were the ones related to philosophy, science and of technical nature. Instead, the texts related to Islam as a faith, from both the theological and juridical perspectives, did not receive the same attention. Peter the Venerable, during his permanence in Spain, surely witnessed this hectic literary activity and, may be noticing the poor attention reserved to the foundational texts of the Islamic civilization, decided to sponsor a project which he considered of great significance in the process of confrontation with the Muslim

---


world, namely the translation in Latin language of a corpus of texts related to the Quran and the life of Prophet Muhammad. The Abbot describes the events leading to this choice in the Prologue of the *Liber contra sectam* as follows:

“This is the reason why I contacted some scholars of expertise in Arabic language, from which that *mortal poison* infected half of the world. Then I persuaded them both with prayers and a conspicuous price to translate in Latin the origin, the life, and the doctrine of that man and the law of Alchoran. And, in order to avoid any defect in the translation and that through a fraud something could be took away from our knowledge, I added a Saracen to the Christian translators. The Christian translators are Robert of Ketton, Hermanno of Dalmatia, Peter of Toledo, while the name of the Saracen is Mahumeth. Those who search attentively in the libraries of this *barbaric people*\(^8\) published for the Latin readers a volume far from being small on this subject. This happened in the same year, namely 1141, I travelled to Spain and I got a conversation with Alfonso, the victorious emperor of Spain”\(^9\).

\(^{8}\)Italics are mine.

\(^{9}\)The original Latin text here translated is preserved in the MS 1162 of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris (A) and MS 381 of the Bibliothèque municipale of Douai (D). The Latin transcription is by Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 203-291. D 180rd-D 180v: “Contuli ergo me ad peritos linguae Arabicae, ex qua procedens mortiferum virus orbem plusquam dimidium infecit. Eis ad transferendum de lingua Arabica in Latinam perditii hominis originem, vitam, doctrinam, legemque ipsamque Alchoran vocatur tam prece quam precio persuasi. Et ut translationi fides plenissima non deesset, nec quicquam fraude aliqua nostrorum notitiae subtrahi posset, Christianis interpretibus etiam Saracenum adiunxi. Christianorum interpretum nomina, Robertus Ketenensis, Armannus Dalmata, Petrus Toletanus, Saraceni Mahumeth nomen erat. Qui intima ipsa barbarae gentis armaria perscrutantes, volumen non parvum ex prae dicta materia Latinis lectoribus ediderunt. Hoc anno illo factum est quo Hispanias adiit, et cum domno Adelfonso victorioso Hys-
While residing in Spain, Peter the Venerable engaged actively in searching of a group of scholars specialized in the Arabic language in order to commission the translation of a set of texts which later became part of the so called *Collectio Toledana*. This collection of writings related to the Islamic doctrine and the life of Prophet Muhammad, included the following documents: the *Fabulae Saracenorum* (The History of Muslims) translated by Robert of Ketton, the *Liber generationis Mahumet* (The book of the birth of Muhammad), the *Doctrina Mahumet* (The teachings of Muhammad) translated both by Hermann of Dalmatia, the *Lex Mahumet Pseudoprophetae* (The Law of Muhammad the Pseudo Prophet) translated by Robert of Ketton and the *Epistula saraceni et rescriptum cristiani* (The Letter of a Muslim and the Christian Answer) translated by Peter of Toledo and

Unfortunately, the scholars could not identify and locate the original Arabic text of this translation. The main difficulty seems to be related to the fact that Robert of Ketton deleted every reference to the authorship of the text in his translation. Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 75-76.

According to a note from Hermann of Dalmatia, the original Arabic text of this translation was entitled *Kitāb Nasab Rasūl Allāh* attributed to both Ka’b al-Ahbār and Sa’īd ibn ‘Umar recalled at the text’s beginning and end, respectively. Julian Ribera-Miguel Palacios Asin, *Manuscritos Arabes y Aljamiados de la Biblioteca de la Junta* (Madrid: Hardpress Publishing, 1912), 44, 50.

The original Arabic text is *Masā’il ‘Abdillāh ibn-Salām*, reported in several manuscripts under different titles. The original Arabic text received little if not scarce attention from the scholars. Guillaume Frédéric Pijper, *Het boek der duizend vragen* (Leiden: Brill, 1924) review by James Horovitz, *Der Islam* 16 (1927), 296-98.

Peter de Poitiers. Inside the *Collectio*, the most remarkable documents for the scholars interested in the evolution of the knowledge of Islam in the Medieval Latin world, are most probably represented by the *Doctrina Mahumet* and the *Lex Mahumet Pseudopropheta*. The latter, in fact, represents the first Latin translation of the Quranic text authored by Robert of Ketton, an ecclesiastic of English origin who was in Toledo busy in the translation of the scientific works of the Arabs.\(^\text{14}\) According to the Abbot of Cluny, Robert of Ketton, at the beginning, was not much enthusiastic of the work, but was convinced to pursue the engagement by the alluring proposal of a conspicuous pecuniary retribution, as Peter the Venerable clearly writes in the Letter sent to Bernard of Clairvaux.

“... I commissioned the translation from Arabic to Latin to two scholars expert in both languages, the English Robert of Ketton, who now is Archideacon of the Church of Pamplona and Hermann of Dalmatia, a scholar of great talent, who I found focused on studying astronomy in Span and persuaded them with an high expenses to undertake this endeavour”. \(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{14}\) To Robert of Ketton is actually due the *Liber algebrae et almucabola*, the Latin transition of Khwarazmi’s *al-Kitāb al-mukhtasar fī isāb al-jabr wa-l-muqābala*.

\(^\text{15}\) *Epistola Petri Cluniacensis ad Bernardum Claravallis* (The letter of Peter the Venerable to Bernard of Clairvaux), A 4rs: “... nichilominus ex Arabico ad Latinitatem perduxii, interpretantibus scilicet viris utriusque linguae peritis, Rotberto Ketenensi de Anglia, qui nunc Pamplilonensis ecclesiae archidiaconus est, Hermanno quoque Dalmata, acutissimi et litterati ingenii scolastico, qui in Hispania circa Hiberum astrologiae arti studentes inveni, eosque ad hoc faciendum multo precio conduxit”.

The first Latin translation of the Quran has been interpreted in an ambivalent way by Latinists. From one side, it has been underlined its inadequacy both at the linguistic and content levels, since the Arabic text has been arbitrarily deconstructed and recomposed through the division of the Suras and the removal of some verses\textsuperscript{16}. Consequently, as a whole, the translation of Robert Ketton should be considered both inadequate and misleading. Others, instead, without questioning the presence of omissions and misconceptions in the Latin translation of the Arabic text, however underlined at the same time that, notwithstanding its several and severe defects and mistakes, the translator showed a deep knowledge of the commentaries to the Quranic text in the case of the interpretation of some specific verses\textsuperscript{17}. Actually, both the perspectives only under determinate but incomplete point of view seem to be quite adequate, since the Latin translation of the Quran has been studied and examined only from the linguistic and stylistic perspectives. The analysis of the text did not cover, in fact, a deep study related to the preconceptions which actually influenced the translation, and at the same time the way the Latin world, and first of all the Abbot of Cluny, benefitted from the translation and how it influenced, at a general level, the Christian knowledge and interpretation of Islam.

Through the translation of the Sacred Book of Islam, the Medieval Christian world tried to appropriate its founding text, interpreting it according to the Catholic orthodoxy. From this point of view, the first Latin translation of the Quran could be considered the first ideological step,


\textsuperscript{17}Thomas E. Burman, “Tafsīr and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qur’an Exegesis and the Latin Qur’ans of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo”, \textit{Speculum} 73 (1998), 703-732.
which ran parallel to the military one, towards the “Re-
conquista” of what seems to belong rightfully to Chris-
tianity. The critical apparatus of the glosses to the me-
dieval text of the Quran, in fact, aims at leading the reader 
through the interpretation of a heretic text, whose doctri-
nal mistakes should be at the same time individuated, 
catalogued and in the end emended by the legitimate re-
presentatives, interpreters and custodian of orthodoxy.18 
In this perspective, the knowledge of Islam does not as-
sume a neutral role in the proposal of a dialogue between 
civilizations, but could instead be interpreted as a means 
of control and assimilation.19

At that particular historical time, the Latin-Christian 
world from one side was highly engaged in the project of 
assimilation of the Muslim intellectual conquests, which 
later would have constituted the roots of Renaissance and, 
at the same time, from another pursued a systematic work 
of deconstruction and deletion of Islam both as a revela-
tion and as a distinct and independent civilization. In-
stead, the germs of the cultural, scientific and intellec-
tual conquests of the Muslims have been introduced in 

18 The original Arabic text of the Quran in the Latin translation by 
Robert of Ketton is actually deprived of its own internal coherence 
and semantic relations, in order to transform it into a heretic text, 
deleting its own independent and original message. 
19 Robert of Ketton himself in the Epistula preceding the trans-
lation of the Quranic text expressed fully this perspective, when 
he wrote: “Lapides igitur et ligna ut tuum deinde pulcherrimum 
et commodissimum edificium coagmentum et indissolubile fugat, nil 
excerpens, nil sensibiiter nisi propter intelligentiam tantum alter-
ans, attuli, Machometique fumum, ad ipsus tuis follibus extinct-
tum... patefeci”. English translation by Kritzeck, Peter the Vener-
able and Islam, 65: “Selecting nothing, altering nothing in the sense 
extcept for the sake of intelligibility, I have brought stones and wood 
so that your beautiful building may hereafter be raised up all joined 
together and imperishable. I have uncovered Mahumeth’s smoke so 
that it may be extinguished by your bellows”. Latin manuscript 
Bibliothèque Nationale, MS 3390, 28rd; BC 1116B.
the Christian world by the clerics and the Churchmen, and this same rich heritage, after centuries, would lead to the questioning of the Catholic Church attempts and claims in relation to the spiritual supremacy of Europe.

Peter the Venerable intended to write an apologetic work aiming at the elaboration of a theoretical apparatus for theoretical confutation of the Islamic theological concepts. The work of the Abbot of Cluny has got a duplex feature. From one perspective, in fact, it constitutes a new and original project in the framework of Medieval Christianity, which seems to have not nurtured any serious interest towards the nature of the Islamic revelation, of the content of the Quranic text and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad beyond the simple propaganda. In the Prologue to the *Liber contra secta sive haeresim sara- cenorum*, Peter the Venerable clearly states:

“I was indignant that the Latins did not know the cause of such perdition and, by that ignorance, could not be moved up any resistance; for there was no one who replied [to Islam] because there was simply no one who knew [about it]”.

Peter the Venerable’s attitude seems to be quite unusual and original, when compared to the general disposition of his contemporaries as, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, who instead was a passionate supporter of the military intervention in the Muslim world, and did not seem to have never taken into consideration—at least as much as concerns the available historical recordings—

---


the need of a dialogue which, in contemporary words, is indeed quite inappropriate for that particular historical time, could be defined as “interreligious” and distinct from the armed confrontation. According to Kritzeck, in fact, Peter the Venerable was in Toledo and actively planning to write his apologetic works against Islam, while Bernard was highly engaged in the preaching of the second crusade (1145-1149) according to an order received from Pope Innocent II (1130-1143), although the actual crusade was carried on by Pope Eugene III (1145-1153). Notwithstanding the differences between the two representatives of the Catholicism of that time, Peter tried to involve Bernard in his intellectual work about Islam, as testified by the Epistola de tralsatione sua (The Letter on the Translation) sent to the Abbot of Clairvaux, in which the Abbot of Cluny clearly states:

“If Your Reverence would engage in this work trying to get close to God -since the faculty for His Grace did not lack- write us and we will send you the book, which still we did not send, in order that, through your mouth full of His Praises, to the spirit of indolence could answer the kind spirit, repleting the Church with the grace of your wisdom and knowledge”.22

However, the Abbot of Clairvaux did not answer to the letter and did not show any interest in Peter’s intellectual and theological project. Most probably, this behaviour should be interpreted as a further instance of the different characters of the two Abbots and the wide disparity be-

22Epistola Petri Cluniacensis ad Bernardum Claracvallis, MS 1162 Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal (Paris) A 4vd: “Si igitur reverentiae vestrae in his laborandi Deo aspirante voluntas fuerit, nam facultas per eius gratiam deesse non poterit, re/scrivite, et mittemus librum quem nondum misimus, ut per os vestrum ipsius laude repletum, spiritui nequitiae “Spiritus benignus” respondeat, et ecclesiae suae thesaurus gratiae vestrae sapitientiae suppleat”.

IRJIC Volume: 1, Issue: 1 (2021)
tween perspectives on several key issues, both at spiritual and political levels, which lead them to assume antithetical views on many matters.

Maybe focusing excessively on the difference between the Abbots of Cluny and of Clairvaux’ attitudes, respectively, some scholars interpreted Peter the Venerable’s theological work against Islam as an indirect evidence of a hidden criticism and rejection of the same notion of “crusade”\textsuperscript{23}. Although the study of the conceptions of the Abbot of Cluny about the necessity of the Crusades and the relation between Christianity and violence in the Medieval time are beyond this study and it has been subjected to several discussions among the scholars,\textsuperscript{24} however it is equally important to consider, albeit briefly, this topic with respect to the present research.

The relation between Christian ethics and violence had been for a long time at the centre of a fierce debate among the medieval thinkers, with a particular attention given to the role of the clergy in case of conflict. The answer to this dilemma was closely related to the role of the Church in the then fledgling social and political structure of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire and the consequent end of the \textit{pax romana}. In relation to the notion of “meritorious violence”, which has been elaborated at the beginning of the Crusaders, the Catholic Church dedicated several councils starting from the Council of Clermont in 1095 and later in 1123 and 1245, on the occasion the Lateran Council I and the Council of Lion, respec-


\textsuperscript{24}Maria Teresa Brolis, “La crociata di Pietro il Venerabile”, 327-354.
tively, when the issue was re-discussed. Most of the scholars, even if the historical recordings have been recently the object of careful and pondered critics, place the discourse pronounced by Urban II in Clermont as the culmination of an ideological process leading to the formulation of the concept of “meritorious violence” and *bellum iustum* (the just war) in relation to the necessity of fighting the enemies of Christianity under the spiritual aegis of the Catholic Church, which under this point of view claimed a key role in the rising political and social structure of the Christian Europe.

In the Council of Clermont and in the following ones, the role of the Catholic Church, interpreted as the fundamental identity marker of the new political reality born from the ruins of the Roman Empire, has been repeatedly restated and consolidated. The role of the clergy, according to what has been decreed in the councils, was to coun-

---

25 Urban II’s discourse in Clermont has been reported in five different versions: Fulbert of Chartres (1101), Robert the Monk (1107), Baldric of Dol (1108-1110), Guibert of Nogent (1109) and William di Malmesbury who wrote thirty years after the end of the First Crusade. These Chronicles historically went back to the period after the First Crusade and for this reason could have been influenced by successive ideologies. Dana Carleton Munro, “The Speech of Pope Urban II at Clermont, 1095”, *American Historical Review XI* (1906) 231-242; Herbert Edward John Cowdrey, “Pope Urban’s II Preaching of the first Crusade”, *History*, 184 (1970), 177-188.

sel spiritually the fighters and, when there was a need, to encourage them to the defence of the faith. This perspective, which places the Church power at the centre of a hegemonic project aiming at controlling the fragmented secular power through a centralizing spiritual supremacy, helps us to locate the role of the clergy in the framework of the propaganda in support of the Crusaders.27

Recently, some scholars of Medieval Christianity underlined the importance of the epistolary and diplomatic exchange between the Catholic and the Orthodox Church in the aftermath of the Battle of Manzikert (1071). This topic, for a long time, has been neglected, considering it wrongly quite marginal in the framework of the researches on the genesis of the phenomenon of the Crusaders. The victory of Manzikert represents the beginning of a series of conquests by the Seljuk Turks in the Byzantine territory. The Byzantine Emperor searched the support of European armies in order to counteract the Turkish military advance. To this period belongs, in fact, the first diplomatic contact with the Pope Gregory VII and the chancellery of the Emperor Michael VII (1071-1078). The Catholic Church, which was requested to mediate and promote the military aid to the Byzantine Empire, put as a necessary condition of its involvement and effort in the fight against the Turks, the reunification of the Catholic and Orthodox church, attached to this was the demand

27 During the Second Lateran Council (1139), the reference to the role of clergy in the military enterprises remained quite ambiguous and, according to some scholars, the prohibition covered some roles as the crossbowmen and archers. The same prohibition has been restated during the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In the *Concordia Discordantium Canonum of Gratian*, a *summa* of the Canonical Medieval Thought, was denied to the members of the clergy to participate actively to the clashes and to them was reserved only the spiritual care of the fighters in defence of the faith. *Corpus Juris Canonici*, ed. Aemil Ludwig Richter-Emil Albert Friedberg (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879), coll. 888-895.
to recognise the supremacy of Rome and consequently of the Papacy on the whole Christian world. This first phase of negotiations, however, did not lead to any settlement of the issue between the two churches and the Byzantines did not receive any military help from the West, except what came from the effort of Robert the Guiscard, which was however, at the same time, independent and double-edged. Pope Gregory VII expressed his deep disappointment in a letter sent to Hugh, then Abbot of Cluny, dated 22 January 1075. The main concern of the Pope was the lost opportunity of the reunification of the two churches, as the following passage clearly demonstrates:

“Great pain and universal sorrow obsess me. The church of the Orient is moving farther from the Catholic faith, and the devil, having killed it spiritually, causes its members to perish in the flesh by the sword of his henchmen lest any time divine grace brings them to a better mind”.

The negotiations resumed during the Pontificate of Urban II at the time of the Emperor Alexius I Komnenos (1081-1118), during the winter of 1090-1091. According to some historians, the real motive behind the promotion of the first crusade was the attempt to bring to completion the endeavour started by Gregory VII, taking advantage of the political weakness and vulnerability of Byzantium.

28 Due to the conflictual relation between the Papacy and Robert the Guiscard, the negotiations with the Catholic Church were kept separated and suffered several setbacks and delays at the time of the brief alliance between Byzantium and Robert the Guiscard.

The accord seemed very close to be reached\textsuperscript{30} and it has been underlined that the same Alexius I utilized the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre as a pretext to obtain military aid against the Turks\textsuperscript{31}.

Both Greek and Latin documents demonstrate the existence, still not fully explained and clarified by historians, of a stunning discrepancy between the political and ideological reasons of the Crusades. It seems quite clear that the ideological frame, namely the “liberation” of the Holy Sepulchre, was intended to conceal and cover up the real political aim of the expedition towards the East. While the Emperor Alexius I understood the importance and the centrality of the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre as a pro-


\textsuperscript{31} Greek source on Alexius I, Theodore Skutariotes, ed. Kostantinos Sathas, Biblioteca Graeca Medii Aevi, 7 (Paris, 1894): “Having considered, therefore, that is was impossible for him alone to undertake the battle on which everything depended, he recognized that he would have to call in the Italians as allies, and effect this with considerable cunning, adroitness and deeply laid planning. For finding that this nation considered unbearable the domination of Jerusalem and the life-giving Sepulchre of Our Saviour Jesus Christ by the Persians and seeing therein a heaven-sent opportunity, he managed, by dispatching ambassadors to the bishop of Old Rome and to those whom they would call kings and rulers of those parts, and by the use of appropriate arguments, to prevail over not a few of them to leave their country and succeeded in directing them in every way to the task. That is the reason why many of them, numbering thousands and tens of thousands, having crossed the Ionian sea, reached Constantinople with all speed. And, having exchanged assurances and oaths with them he advanced towards the East. With the aid of God and their alliance and by his own efforts he speedily expelled the Persians from Roman territories, liberated the cities and restored his sway in the East to its former glory. Such was this emperor; great in the conception of plans and the doing.” English translation from original Greek by Charanis, “Byzantium, the West and the Origin of the First Crusade”, 34.
pagandistic pretext to obtain the much need military help
against the Turks, the Catholic Church, through the no-
tion of the Pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem,
was confirming and restating its strong and central “po-
litical” role not only in Europe but at the world level, as
the only legitimate representative of Christianity.

The religious and spiritual notion of “extra ecclesiam
nulla salus”\textsuperscript{32} entailed also the universal role of Western
Christianity not only in relation to Islam or Judaism, but
also to the other Christian confessions and churches, as
the Orthodox one. The role of spiritual guide of the en-
tire Christian world needed to be constantly reaffirmed
through an active political leadership, in which -according
to a medieval paradigm- the spiritual and political ele-
ments often were confounded and merged, as it could be
clearly seen in the propaganda of the First Crusade.

For this reason, the preaching of the war effort of the
Crusaders, which could have involved not only the nobles
but also the common population, needed a well-structured
ideological propaganda in order to inspire and convince
the common people and to be universally accepted. The
propaganda was conducted quite widely in the sanctuaries
and in the churches, where in the medieval times pilgrims
gathered not only during the canonical festivities but also
in every period of the year. During the preaching of the
first crusade, due to the centrality attributed to the liber-
ation of the Holy Land and the Holy Sepulchre, the notion
of Islam as enemy of Christianity was promoted and con-
solidated, and an eminently political issue become an es-
chatological conflict between the Church of Christ and its
enemies. In other words, the notion of “holy war” seems
to have been formulated and spread in this time, if not in
its verbal statement at least in the ideological one.

The war effort of the Crusades was aimed at involv-

\textsuperscript{32}Literally: “There is no salvation out of the Catholic Church”. 
ing the military forces of the Catholic world, leading it against a unique and common enemy clearly identified and identifiable, in order to arrest the internal spinning pressure risking to endanger the political unity of the Christian world, which instead was constantly promoted and fostered by the Church. At the same time, through the preaching of the Crusaders, the Catholic Church promoted and reaffirmed its role of supreme spiritual guide of the Christian world. In the Middle Age the two categories of “politic” and “spiritual” respectively were not clearly discernible, even when the temporal side of the Church in several cases lead the papacy to fight with the then emerging secular powers.\textsuperscript{33}

From this point of view, then, the crusades could be reinterpreted as an attempt to harmonize and balance the two forces competing for the dominion and the supremacy in the Christian world, leading their aggression towards a common enemy. The medieval Christian world was a closed reality, homologated and aggressive, a world \textit{in fieri} which, in the constant search for a stable and founding identity, did not tolerate any form of difference interpreted as a dangerous destabilizing element. The forces fighting for the political supremacy in different European territories constituted a constant danger for the unity of Christianity and the stability of medieval Europe and may be this is the reason why Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), understood the compelling need to arrest the wave of violence and barbarity which very often threatened not only

\textsuperscript{33}In this regard, it should be recalled that, at the beginning of the First Crusade, the political situation in Europe was quite unstable. The Emperor Henry IV (1056-1106) has not been recognised neither by Gregory VII (who excommunicated him in 1076) neither by Urban II, who became pope in 1088 and whose pontificate was not recognised by Henry IV, who instead previously invested with the same title Clement III (1080-1100). This happened in the historical frame of the Investiture Controversy between the end of XI century and the beginning of the XII century.
the spiritual interests of the Church, but also the temporal ones, promoted the formation of the so-called “militia Christi” (the army of Christ) or “militia Sancti Petri” (the army of Saint Peter), where the medieval military put itself freely at the service of the Pope to fight the enemies of Christianity. The institution of the soldiers of Christ or of Saint Peter\(^{34}\) had, then, got a double aim, namely the spiritual control of the military and the targeting of a common enemy.

The notion of Crusade understood as an “holy pilgrimage” was actively proclaimed and preached by the common clergy in the churches, in the sanctuaries and monasteries, but in several cases also by bishops and archbishops and, if we have to trust a chronicle of that time, by the same Pope Urban II who was involved in the promotion of the crusades and to the spread of its ideological foundation in the Western and Southern France. The notion of pilgrimage, which has been central in the devotional and penitential practice of the Middle Ages, was resumed in the propagandistic language of the Crusades. In this new perspective, the pilgrimage was not directed to the worship of the saints’ relics but towards the Holy Sepulchre. The remission of the sins was promised to those who intended to pursue this holy pilgrimage driven only by religious devotion and not by the desire for mundane gains.\(^{35}\) A few years later, during the I Lateran Council (1123), it was clearly stated that the Catholic Church granted the remissions of the sins to those who actively engaged in the defence of the faith against infidels.

In this regard, it has been noted\(^{36}\) that the terms closely connected or expressing directly the notion of Crusades as a “new mean to attain salvation”.

\(^{34}\) Cowdrey, “Pope Urban’s II Preaching of the first Crusade”, 178.
\(^{35}\) In line with this perspective, Guilbert of Nogent defined in 1108 the Crusades as a “new mean to attain salvation”.
\(^{36}\) Cowdrey, “Pope Urban’s II Preaching of the first Crusade”, 182-188.
sade, as Cruz, Crusada and Croseria, appeared in Latin texts only from the XIII century. Previously, the Latin writers used linguistic terms related to the concept of pilgrimage to the Holy Land as, for example, Iter and Peregrinatio, namely “Travel” and “Pilgrimage”. The Latin expression Iter Hierosolimitanum37 actually, in the XII century, started meaning to participate to the enterprise of the Crusades. In several letters sent by Pope Urban II to different European personalities38 aimed at involving them in the proposed liberation of the Holy Land, it is clear the presence of a double discourse centred and rooted in the spiritual benefits deriving from the Pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in this particular case, intended with an active involvement in the fight against Islam interpreted as the enemy of Christendom. The liberation of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Church’s perspective, involved also the supposed liberation of the Eastern Churches, the same ones who actually welcomed the Muslim rule due to the severe persecution of the Byzantine Church.

The Abbot of Cluny, regarding the general nature and disposition of the Christian world towards the Islamic Civilization, did never put into discussion or doubted the necessity of undertaking an enterprise aimed at the military attack against Muslim power, but he drew a clear and neat distinction between the political authority of the Church expressed through the layman, whose duty was to fight with weapons and armies, and that one of monks and, in general ecclesiastics, who, by their role in the Christian world in general and in the Church hierarchies in particular, were called to fight with reason and dialectical disputation. In several passages of his rich epistolary,39

37 Literally: “Travel to Jerusalem”.
38 Cowdrey, “Pope Urban’s II Preaching of the first Crusade”, 177-188.
the Abbot of Cluny shows a deep concern in relation to the danger implied in the confusion between the secular orders, namely the cavalry and generally the layman, and the religious ones\textsuperscript{40}. This confusion, in the long run, could have been extremely detrimental for the peculiarity of the consecrated life, as it was instituted and developed by the institutions of western monasticism. Notwithstanding, then, the necessity to respond with the armies to the Muslim political dominance in the East and to their presence in the West in the territories of Andalusia, the Abbot of Cluny refuses the idea of the “armed monk” preferring instead for them a quite different role in the framework of the fight against the Islamic world.

Putting into perspective, Peter the Venerable’s decision to translate the founding texts of Islamic civilization and to write a series of documents aiming at its confusion, appears more consistent with the general spirit of the time. In fact, notwithstanding the choice to root his polemic and apologetic works on the knowledge of Islamic texts appears original respect to the general disposition of the medieval clergy, however the Abbot of Cluny re-proposes the same paradigm promoted by the Catholic Church, strengthening it through a reference to a bond of continuity with the work of the Fathers of the Church:

“If, then, any heresy, in any time risen, could be immune from the “sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”, only Muhammad’s error will be protected and immune? Will the Christian language deal with it little or nothing? Maybe it is abstaining from what is harmless and less dangerous? O reader, this heresy has not provoked any damage to the Church of God? Did not this

\textsuperscript{40}This confusion of orders and status became quite evident at the time of the institutions of the order of the Templars, founded between 1118 and 1119 and officialised in 1129 under the spiritual patronage of Bernard of Clairvaux.
error devastate and ravage the Christian world? Who did
tear its borders? Who increased the number of those lost
into damnation?”

In the *Contra sectam saracenorum*, Islam is actually
introduced as a Christian heresy. The Abbot of Cluny
expresses this concept both in the Letter to Bernard of
Clairvaux and in several passages from the *Prologue*:

“My intention was to follow the example of the Fa-
thers of the Church, who did not permit that any heresy
of their time -even small or unimportant- could be passed
under silence. Actually, they resisted with all the strength
of the faith, and with both writings and discussion they
demonstrated how each heresy should be detested and cen-
sured”.

“Indeed, the reason, which compelled me to write, is
the same one which appeared evident to the numerous and
excellent Fathers [of the Church]. Since they could not suf-
f er even the slightest damage to the Christian faith, nei-
ther tolerate the insane madness of the heretic conceptions
with respect to the right and sound doctrine, they avoided
to remain silent, when it became necessary to speak, on
the contrary fully aware that was more suitable for them

---

41D 179vs: “Si ergo nulla heresis quolibet tempore orta, immunis a
“gladio Spiritus, quod est verbum Dei” esse potuit, nunquid tutus ab
illo Mahumeticus error erit? An forte ut nullum aut parvum Chris-
tiana lingua transibit? An forte ut innoxio vel minus noxio parcet?
Et quae unquam o lector haeresis adeo aecclesiae Dei nocuit? Quis
unquam error adeo rem publicam Christianam vexavit? Quis in tan-
tum terminos eius rescidit? Quis tanta massa perditorum numerum
infernalem adauxit?”

42Epistola, A 4rs: “Fuit autem in hoc opera intentio mea, ut
morem illum partum sequerer, quo nullam unquam suorum tem-
porum vel levissimam, ut sic dicam, haeresim, silendo praeterierunt,
quin ei totis fidei viribus resistenter, et scriptsis atque disputation-
ibus esse detestandam ac damnabilem demonstrrent”.
in the balance of judgement -which stays with God. . . .”

The definition of Islam as a Christian heresy is endowed not only with a theological value but involves in general terms the foundations of the hegemonic project of the Catholic Church in the Middle Age. The notion of Islam as “heresy” has not been formulated originally by Latin medieval thinkers, but instead by a John of Damascus (675-749), the famous representative of the Eastern Orthodox Church, recognised by Catholics also as one of the Church Fathers. The conception of heresy has been also at the centre of the religious policy of the Byzantines which reflected clearly the specular relation between political universalism and religious uniformity based on the creed established as orthodox by the early councils. The same paradigm of power organization and hegemony was later re-proposed in the Catholic world for the reasons previously explained.

The word “heresy” comes from the Greek noun “aireo” which could be translated as “to choose”, “to make a choice putting somebody out of the group he originally belongs”. According to this perspective, the heretic could be defined as a kind of “betrayer” or “an extremely dangerous stranger”, since he could be considered, at the same time, familiar and remote from the group’ common experience or, as in this case, the hegemonic culture or civilization.

43 D 178rd: “Causa plane scribendi haec michi fuit, quae multis et magnis patribus extitit. Non poterunt illi pati quamlibet vel parvam iacturam fidei Christianae, nec adversus sanam doctrinam insanientem multiformium hereticorum vesaniam tolerarunt. Caverunt esse muti ubi loquendum erat, advertentes immo plenissime scientes, non minus se addicendos in supitili apud Deum statera iudicat de infructuoso vel quod maius est damnosus silentio, quam de verbo otioso vel noxio”.


45 Lester Kurtz, ”The Politics of Heresy”, American Journal of
The heretic, according to the orthodox perspective, is familiar since he shares the founding religious heredity of a civilization - in this case the medieval *Latinitas* - but he is stranger and dangerous since he “decided”, throughout a personal and extra-canonical interpretation of the Holy Scripture, to create a language and a grammar placed at the heart of a different civilization and (by necessity) opposed, which both from the theological and political perspectives could not be interpreted as equal, complementary to the Christian one or reclaiming the same right to exist along with it.

The notion of heresy, generally understood, and not exclusively in relation to Islam, constitutes one of the foundational assets of the Latin-Christianity civilization both in relation to other denominations reclaiming the Christian name and other faiths as Judaism⁴⁶ and Islam. The notions of orthodoxy and heresy, according to the medieval Catholic mindset, are two terms existing in a bilateral relation form the semantic point of view, but unilateral from the political one. Orthodoxy and heresy could be understood in a semantic bilateral relation, since the orthodoxy is defined through heresy and vice versa. In other words, the notion of heresy is functional to the formulation of the orthodox theological discourse. The Latin Christianity, through the notion of heresy and the military struggle against the heretics, defines both its foundational theological discourse and the political supremacy through the spiritual oversight on Christian nations. In

⁴⁶Peter the Venerable wrote also against Judaism in its *Liber adversus Judaeorum inveteratum duritiem* (Book against the ancient Jewish lack of understanding), written between 1140 and 1143.
other words, this paradigm is rooted in the identification between *Cristianitas* and *Latinitas*, namely between the Christian-Catholic Church and the Latin civilization. This identification unveils the deep relation between orthodoxy and the legitimate political power in the Middle Age. When the Abbot of Cluny portrays Islam as a heresy and the Muslim world as “heretic”, he is implicitly reclaiming the right of the Christian world to re-conquest what belongs to it by right.

In another passage from the *Liber contra sectam*, Peter the Venerable says:

“The Islamic rage arisen from the Ishmaelite Arabs, corrupted Persians, Medes, Syrians, Armenians, Ethiopians, Indians and the remaining oriental kingdom and a wide part of Asia or almost its totality, and diverting them from Christianity or from the ancient errors converted them to that sect, removing them from Christ and subjugating them to the Devil. Then not with the peaceful reason but with the violent invasion, after having submitted almost all the East with the strength of the armies, won Egypt, Libya, and the whole Africa to that profane religion and so, after having occupied two parts of the world, did not leave intact to Christ and to his Christians even the third one, which we call Europe, after having entered into Spain”\(^47\).

\(^47\)D 179vd: “At Mahumeticus furor ab Hysmaelitis Arabibus sumens exordium, Persas, Medos, Syros, Armenois, Ethiopes, Indos, ac reliqua orientis regna ipsamque in tribus orbis partibus maximam Asiam pene totam corruptit, et vel a Christianismo avertens, vel a quibus-libet antiquis erroribus ad perditii hominis sectam convertens, subtraxit Christo, substravit diabo. Hinc non miti ratione, sed violenta incursione, toto fere ut dictum est armis oriente subacto, Egyptum, Lybiam, Africamque universam prophanae religioni subiecit, et sic duabus mundi partibus occupatis, nec tertiam quae Europa vocatur, Hyspasia pervasa Christo vel Christianis suis integra, dereliquit”.

IRJIC Volume: 1, Issue: 1 (2021) 27
In the same way the Fathers of the Church fought for a long time against every form of doctrinal deviation in order to preserve the integrity of the doctrine of the Christian-Catholic faith, the Medieval Church -de facto spiritual leader of the new political reality of Europe and de iure of all the Christian world- was in the middle of a conflict against Islam, which is actually defined as the *pessimus hostis dei*.\(^{48}\)

In another passage from the *Summa totius haeresis saracenorum*, the Abbot of Cluny expresses this perspective as follows:

“Meanwhile, through the judgment of the One who is defined “terrible in his counsels over the sons of men” [Ps. 95:5] and “has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” [Rom. 9:18], permitted that was submitted to the error of Satan and Sergius, the monk, who belonged to the Nestorian sect and, after being expelled from the Church, moved to that part of Arabia. In this way, a bond was created between the heretic monk and the false prophet. Then Sergius in league with Mahumeth, completed what was missing and understood the scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments according to Nestorian doctrine, which deny that our Saviour is God, partly as has been interpreted by himself, when it was explained to him, and instructing him with the lies of the apocryphal writings, made him a Nestorian Christian”.\(^{49}\)

\(^{48}\)“The worst enemy of God”. *Liber contra sectam*, Liber Primus, D 184vd-D 185rs.

\(^{49}\)A 2rs: “Cum interim iudicio illius qui “terribilis in consiliis” dicitur “super filios hominum” et qui “miseretur cui vult, et quem vult indurat”, dedit Sathan successum errori, et Segium monachum, hereticii Nestorii sectatorem, ab ecclesia expulsum, ad partes illas Arabiae transmissit, et monachum hereticum pseudoprophetae coniuxit. Itaque Segius coniunctus Mahumeth, quod ei deerat supplevit, et scripturas sacras tam Veteris Testamenti quam Novi secondum
The writings of Peter the Venerable substantially re-stated, in a structured and systematic way, the conceptions circulating in Europe about Islam; and their study clearly demonstrates that the reading of the Islamic sources translated into Latin did not lead to a clarification of the Islamic doctrine or to an individual and personal awareness about the real nature of Islamic faith and the content of the Quranic revelation along with the main features of the Islamic civilization intended as distinct and separate from the Christendom. In other words, the Abbot of Cluny used the Latin translation of the Quran and other writings in a wanton and deviant way. His aim, in fact, was not to achieve knowledge of Islam objectively as a faith, but instead to elaborate a polemic text aiming at the conversion of Muslims. The Christian Middle Age, in the countenance of the Ecclesiastical hierarchy, was a militant reality engaged constantly in a “missionary” activity which often accompanied or overlapped the military effort against the “infidels” and the “heretics”. Although Peter expresses the will to get close to Muslims inspired by Christian love, the language employed in the First book of the *Contra sectam* and in other passages of the same text betrays a belligerent intent, as could be noticed in the following passage:

“I strongly turn towards you, nor as always we do, along with weapons, but with words, not with violence but with reason, not with hatred but with love”.  

“I invite you then to the salvation, not the short-lived one but the permanent, not the one terminating with this

\[\text{magistri sui Nestorii intellectum, qui Salvatorem nostrum Deum esse negabat, partim prout sibi visum est, ei exponens, simulque apochriphorum fabulis cum plenissime imbuens, Christianum Nestorianum effecit}.\]

\[\text{D 181rs: “Aggreditor inquam vos, non ut nostri saepe faciunt amis sed verbis non vi sed ratione non odio sed amore”}.\]
brief life but the one resting in the eternal life. Time has been instituted by God for the mortals in order they may learn how to use it, but only those who understand about God what is true and did not care only about the phantasies of their hearts, but those who know how He wanted and thought to be worshipped”\textsuperscript{51}.

Although Peter the Venerable’ attitude could be considered revolutionary under some aspects, however is not far from the prevalent medieval \textit{weltanschauung}. The implicit perspective, in the Abbot of Cluny’s point of view (as of all the Medieval Christian writers) on the role of the Catholic Church in the world order, could be defined both exclusivist and all-encompassing. According to this paradigm every ethnic-religious community, both endowed or not with a distinct political expression, was a potential subject to conversion and assimilation in the uniform world order promoted and governed by the Ecclesiastical hierarchies.

\textsuperscript{51}D 181rd: “Invito vos ad salutem, non quae transit, sed quae permanet, non quae finitur cume vita brevi, sed quae permanet in vitam aeternam. Hanc consequi, hac tempore a Deo praestituto frui mortalibus quidem datum est, sed non nisi illis qui de Deo quod est, non quod non est sentiunt, qui cum iuxta cordis sui phantasmata, sed sicut ipse se coli et vult et praecipit colunt”.

References


S. Lei  The notion of Islam as “Heresy”


Munro, Dana C. “The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades”. *Speculum* 6/3 (Jul. 1931), 329-343.


Vernet, Juan. “El valle del Ebro come nexo entre Oriente y Occidente”. *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Lattras de Barcelona* 23 (1850), 249-286.

Sabrina Lei
Tawasul International
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-9955
drsabinalei@gmail.com