
Riccoldo da Montecroce and his encounter with Muslims

Pilgrimage – Dialogue – Polemic

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Zusammenfassung

Riccoldo da Montecroce (1243-1320) Engagement in Sachen nichtchristlicher Religionen und speziell der Muslime innerhalb des Dominikanerordens lässt sich verstehen im Kontext von dessen Auftrag: »für die Predigt und das Heil der Menschen«. Die Berufung des Ordens in der Kirche zielt auf die *missio ad gentes*. Ihr widmen sich die Dominikaner im 13. Jahrhundert insbesondere in Argumentation und Disputation mit den Muslimen im Mittleren Osten und auf der Iberischen Halbinsel. Der Beitrag skizziert Riccoldos Leben vor seiner missionarischen Berufung, sein Ungenügen an einem Leben des »Sitzens und Müßigseins«, seine ausgedehnten Reisen im Nahen Mittleren Osten, seinen Aufenthalt in Bagdad, seine aus Kenntnis erster Hand gespeisten Überlegungen über den Islam, die persönliche Krise aufgrund der Erfahrung des Scheiterns der christlichen Mission unter den Muslimen und die reale, körperliche Verfolgung. Riccoldos Leben und Schriften können noch immer Inspiration und Warnung für den christlich-muslimischen Dialog sein. Sie machen deutlich: Unsere Religionen sind verschieden, aber die Welt, in der wir leben, ist dieselbe.

Schlüsselbegriffe

→ Riccoldo da Montecroce
→ Dominikanermission
→ Christlich-muslimischer Dialog

Abstract

Within the Dominican Order, the commitment of Riccoldo da Montecroce (1243-1320) in matters concerning non-Christian religions and in particular Muslims can be understood in the context of its mission: »for preaching and the salvation of souls.« The vocation of the Order in the Church aims at the *missio ad gentes*. The Dominicans of the 13th century devoted themselves to this, in particular in argumentation and disputation with the Muslims in the Middle East and on the Iberian peninsula. The article sketches Riccoldo's life before his missionary vocation, his dissatisfaction with a life of »sitting and idleness«, his extensive travels in the Near Middle East, his stay in Baghdad, his reflections on Islam fed by first-hand knowledge, his personal crisis due to the experience of the failure of Christian missionary work among Muslims, and the real physical persecution. Riccoldo's life and writings can still be an inspiration and a warning for Christian-Muslim dialogue. They make it clear that our religions are different, but the world in which we live is the same.

Keywords

→ Riccoldo da Montecroce
→ Dominican missionary work
→ Christian-Muslim dialogue

Sumario

El compromiso de Riccoldo da Montecroce (1243-1320) dentro de la orden de los dominicos en relación con las religiones no-cristianas, especialmente con los musulmanes, se puede comprender en el contexto de la tarea de la orden: »para la predicación y la salud de los hombres«. La vocación de la orden en la Iglesia tiene presente desde el principio la *missio ad gentes*. A ella se dedican los dominicos en el siglo XIII, sobre todo por medio de la argumentación y la disputación con los musulmanes del Oriente Medio y en la Península Ibérica. El artículo esboza la vida de Riccoldo antes de su vocación misionera, su incapacidad para »estar sentado y ocioso«, sus largos viajes por el Oriente Medio, su estancia en Bagdad, sus reflexiones sobre el islam, producto de conocimientos de primera mano, la crisis personal a causa de la experiencia del fracaso de la misión cristiana entre los musulmanes, y, finalmente, la real persecución corporal. La vida y los escritos de Riccoldo pueden seguir sirviendo de inspiración y advertencia ante el diálogo cristiano-musulmán. Nos muestran claramente que nuestras religiones son diferentes, pero el mundo, en el que vivimos, es el mismo.

Palabras clave

→ Riccoldo da Montecroce
→ Misión dominicana
→ Diálogo cristiano-musulmán

In order to have a better understanding of the subject under examination, it is important to situate Riccoldo da Montecroce's engagement with non-Christian religions in general and Muslims in particular among mediaeval Dominicans within the context of the scope and the mission of the Order of Preachers, that is to say, *preaching and the salvation of souls, specifically*.¹

The preaching that St. Dominic (d. 1221) aimed at was truly a proclamation of the Word of God, born out of a profound love for Scripture. He therefore laid emphasis on study. Having a vocation within the Church, the scope of the Order extends to the mission *ad gentes*. The companions of Dominic had frequently highlighted his desire to spread the Word of God beyond the confines of Christendom.²

This far-reaching extension of the Order's scope could be undertaken by various means, among which one should mention argumentation and its offshoot, disputation. This method had its basis in Dominic's early apostolic experience, especially in his conduct with the Albigensian heretics in Toulouse.

Therefore, in light of what has been stated above, Dominicans were inspired to employ the same approach adopted by their founder in their encounters with Muslims, especially in the wake of the expansion of the Order into non-Christian lands of the Middle East by way of the Crusades and the frequent encounter with non-Christians in the newly-conquered territories of the Iberian peninsula by way of the *Reconquista*. The *quaestio disputata*, which formed an integral part of the scholastic method taught in mediaeval universities, was already a common occurrence in every Dominican priory in obedience to the Constitutions of the Order which had been promulgated in 1220. The Dominicans expended considerable energy in order to ensure the highest quality of these debates, which took place in their priory schools, especially since these were open to the public.

1 The character of Riccoldo da Montecroce

Riccoldo Pennini da Monte di Croce (c.1243-1320), better known as Fra Riccoldo da Montecroce is in many ways an enigmatic figure. He was already so in his day. One may legitimately ask why he and his works should draw our attention. The following are but a few reasons for choosing him:

a His life cannot be separated from the works that he penned, since the latter are written in a strong autobiographical vein. In his writings his personality stands out with all its human strengths and weaknesses, and in all its steadfastness and self-doubts. In the words of Jean-Marie Gaudeul, »he is seen as a zealous, impetuous yet warm and sensitive man of

¹ *Prologue to the Primitive Constitutions*. This phrase is set within the context of the right to dispensation exercised by the superior concerning certain aspects of common life: »The superior is to have the right to dispense the brethren in his own community whenever it seems useful to him, particularly in things which seem likely to obstruct study or preaching or the good of souls, since our Order is known to have been founded initially for the sake of preaching and the salvation of souls, and our concern should be primarily and passion-

ately directed to this all-important goal, that we should be useful to the souls of our neighbours«, Early Dominicans: Selected Writings, edited with an Introduction by Simon TUGWELL, O. P., New York 1982, 457.

² During his testimony at the process of canonization of St Dominic held in Bologna in 1233, Bro. Bonaventure of Verona is recorded to have stated:

»Item dixit, quod in tantum erat zelator animarum, quod non solum ad fideles sed etiam ad infideles et gentiles et in infernum damnatos extendebat caritatem suam et compassionem et

multu pro eis flebat et multum erat fervens quod ad se in predicando et ad alios in mittendo predicatorum, in tantum etiam, quod desiderabat ire ad predicandum gentibus. Item interrogatus quomodo scit hoc, respondit, quia audiebat ab eo et ab aliis fratribus. Et in talis tractatibus sepius fuit et cum eo etiam in collationibus«, Acta Canonizationis S. Dominici, in: Monumenta Historica Sancti Patris Nostri Dominici, Vol. XVI, Fasc. II, Rome 1935, 132.

God. At the same time, bold and patient.³ He is, therefore, a scholar with whom a reader may empathize and identify oneself.

b His personal odyssey is a sober reminder of the difficulties and pitfalls that one encounters when engaging in interreligious dialogue. As Rita George-Tvrtković has rightly noted, »he poignantly expresses – perhaps better than any other medieval writer – the deep tensions inherent in any interreligious encounter«.⁴

c The period in which he lived was characterized by a sense of innate curiosity and an urge towards discovery as seen in the lives of two renowned mediaeval figures who have earned their place in history, namely Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324), both of whom were known for their engagement with Muslims, one as a theologian and the other as a merchant and an explorer.

d Both the circumstances and the plight of Christians in the Middle East at the time of Riccoldo da Montecroce are by no means different from those that they face today, namely conflicts among the various denominations from within and savage persecution by oppressive Muslim regimes from without.⁵

2 Early Life and missionary calling

Very little is known about his infancy except for what he himself wrote *en passant*, namely that he had been devoted to Saint Francis since his youth.⁶ Such an admission should not come as a surprise, given the fact that his family home in Florence was situated in the quarter of San Pietro Maggiore, which stood close to the Franciscan church of Santa Croce. He entered the Order of Preachers in 1267 and completed his studies at the priory of Santa Maria Novella. He went on to teach logic at the Dominican *Studium* in Pisa. This detail alone explains his preference for debate when engaging with both Christian and Muslim scholars. Twenty-one years later, in response to a call by Pope Nicholas IV for volunteers to join the mission in the East, through the bull *Cum hora undecima* issued on the 3rd of September 1288, Riccoldo obtained permission from the then Master of the Order Muñio da Zamora to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and preach to the Mongols and to the Muslims. At the age of forty-five he was already of an advanced age for undertaking such a mission. However, he was more than happy to take on this enterprise. He gives his reasons for embarking on such an arduous mission in his final work entitled *Liber peregrinationis* (commonly known as the *Itinerarium*):

»I realized that it was not prudent for me to sit and be idle for so long and to not try some of the hardships of poverty and a long pilgrimage, especially considering the long

3 Jean-Marie GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes*, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, Rome 2000, vol. I, 172.

4 Rita GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam*, Turnhout 2012, xii.

5 One needs only to refer to Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* promulgated during his Apostolic Visitation to Lebanon in 2012. See nn. 11; 16-18; 26-28.

6 In Letter Three he begins his appeal to the *poverello* of Assisi by addressing him thus: »O blessed Francis, to whom I have been devoted since my youth until now«, Letter Three: concerning the church militant to the entire church triumphant and to the celestial curia, in: GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, *A Christian Pilgrim* (n. 4), 154. The original text in Latin states: »O beate Franciscus, cui ab infancia mea et usque nunc fui devotus ...«, Epistola III: Ad totam ecclesiam triumphantem, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 7317 (xv sec. med), f. 257r. <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (8.10.2016). The critical edition of the entire text of the *Epistole* in the original Latin version by Fr Emilio Panella O.P. has been made available on the internet by the editor himself.

and laborious pilgrimages I had undertaken up to that point in order to study the secular sciences which are called liberal.⁷

Here one must recall the fact that throughout the thirteenth century Florentine, Venetian and Genoese merchants had already established trading posts throughout the Islamic world and made frequent visits to the Middle and Near East in order to barter for commodities. It is also a fact that both Dominican and Franciscan missionaries frequently accompanied merchants on their travels in order to preach the Gospel.

3 His pilgrimage to the Orient

In his *Liber peregrinationis* Riccoldo outlines his itinerary from his first port of call at 'Akka (Acre, Syria) till his arrival in Baghdad. Contrary to his Dominican contemporary Jordan of Severac's *Mirabilia descripta*, Riccoldo's work is by no means an explorer's diary; it is rather a theological reflection of a missionary who seeks to understand the doctrinal and religious environments of the regions through which he is travelling. The account of his arrival and subsequent journey in the Holy Land is that of a pilgrim:

»I crossed the sea in order to see with my bodily eyes those places which Christ had visited in the flesh⁸ – above all the places where he deigned to die for the salvation of the human race – so that the memory of his passion would be imprinted more firmly upon my mind, and so that the blood of Christ which was spilled for our salvation would give me the courage and strength to preach and die for him who had given me life through his own death.⁹

There he could also witness firsthand the plight of Christians in this part of the Eastern Mediterranean region as well as the ravages caused by the Mamluks that left most of the holy sites in a pitiful state of utter destruction or dereliction. The church of St Mary Magdalene he writes, »was being used as a stable«;¹⁰ on Mt Tabor he found »many great churches destroyed«;¹¹ Jerusalem itself could »truly be called a city of catastrophe and destruction«;¹² and no pilgrims were allowed to enter the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

From the Holy Land he then proceeded to 'Akka and from there he continued to Tripoli (Lebanon) and Tarsus (Turkey), Erzurum or Nakhitchewan, in Greater Armenia, Tiflis (or Tbilisi in present-day Georgia). He then proceeded to Tabriz, which was situated right in the heart of the Mongol Ilkhān Khanate wherein he remained for six months, and then to

⁷ Riccoldo DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage*, edited and translated in: GEORGE-VRTRKOVIĆ, *A Christian Pilgrim* (n. 4), 176. The original manuscript in Latin reads: »cogitavi, inquam, non esse tutum quod ego longo tempore sederem et otiosus essem, et ut probarem aliquid de labore pauperis et longe peregrinationis, maxime cum in mente mea revolverem quam <lon>gas et laboriosas peregrinationes <adsump>seram adhuc secularis existens ut addiscerem illas seculares scientias quas liberales appellant.« *Liber peregrinationis* [1rb]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber11.htm#1> (11.1.2018). The original manuscript of the *Liber peregrinationis* is found in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek lat. 4° .446, ff. 1r-24r. The critical edition

of the entire text of the *Liber peregrinationis* in the original Latin version by Fr Emilio Panella O.P. has been made available on the internet by the editor himself.

⁸ It took Riccoldo forty days to sail across the Mediterranean and arrive on the Syrian coast.

⁹ DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 176. The original text in Latin states: »incipiens peregrinationem transivi mare ut loca illa corporaliter viderem que Christus corporaliter visitavit, et maxime locum in quo pro salute humani generis mori dignatus est, ut memoria passionis eius in mente mea imprimeretur tenacius, et sanguis Christi pro nostra salute effusus, esset michi robur et firmamentum ad predicandum et moriendum pro illo qui michi sua

morte vitam donaverat.« *Liber peregrinationis* [1rb]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber11.htm#1> (11.1.2018).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 205. The original manuscript in Latin reads: »Venimus itaque per fluvium recto cursu usque Baldaccum civitatem mirabilem, ubi occurrerunt nobis fratres nostri extra civitatem; quos cum vidimus, tantus fuit fletus et inundantia lacrimarum pre gaudio quod paucis verbis explicari non posset.« *Liber peregrinationis* [14rb]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber17.htm> (11.12.2018).

¹⁴ Heb. 13:2. See also Gen 18:2 and *Jug* 13:15-20.

Mosul, Tikrit, and finally to Baghdad. Here one observes Riccoldo took many an unusual detour in order to reach his destination. Concerning his arrival at the outskirts of the city he writes:

»And so we came directly to the marvelous city of Baghdad via the river. Brothers of our Order met us outside the city. Words are not able to express the weeping and tears of joy which flowed when we saw them.«¹³

From the above text one would presume that a Dominican community had already been established there some years earlier.

4 His sojourn in Baghdad and his reflections on Islam

Here Riccoldo offers the following portrayal of the generous nature of the people of Baghdad and the hospitable way in which he was greeted into their homes:

»Their friendliness and urbanity towards foreigners is such that we were received as angels¹⁴ when we wished to enter the homes of the noble and the learned. For they received us with such gladness that it often seemed to us that we had truly found hosts of our own Order – hosts who welcomed us as freely¹⁵ as brothers into their own homes. Frequently, out of a certain urbanity and intimacy, they asked us to say something in praise of God or Christ. And whenever they said the name of Christ in our presence, they never did so without adding the appropriate acclamation, for example, ›Christ be praised‹ or something like that.«¹⁶

One may detect, however, in the author's work a certain ambivalence, blending admiration for Muslim practice with contempt for Muslim belief. He was »stupefied to discover how – with a law of such perfidy – works of great perfection could be found«.¹⁷ Such mixed sentiments come out clearly in his final work, *Contra legem Saracenorum*, wherein he declares:

»This Muhammad persecuted the Church of God more than all those who ever did before or after. For he generally savaged it not in one way but in three. By being fiercely tyrannical, by leading people astray through law, and by undermining simple folk through hypocrisy.«¹⁸ God »who is terrible in his counsels over the sons of men« [Ps. 65:5; trans.

¹³ As can be noted in the following footnote, the Latin text has »libentissime«, which should actually be translated as »gladly« or »with pleasure«.

¹⁶ DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 214. The original text in Latin reads: »Affabilitatem et urbanitatem [18va] tantam servant ad extraneos quod nos recipiebant ut angelos quando volebamus intrare ad domos nobilium et sapientium. Nam cum tanta letitia recipiebant quod videbatur nobis frequenter quod vere invenissemus hospites ordinis et illos qui libentissime fratres recipiunt in domibus suis. Frequenter enim quidam urbanitate et familiaritate petebant quod diceremus aliquid de Deo vel aliquid ad commendationem Christi. Et quando coram nobis nominabant Christum, nunquam nomina-

bant eum nisi cum digna laude, scilicet ›Christus laudetur ipse‹ vel aliquid tale«, *Liber peregrinationis*; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber17.htm> (11.1.2018). The reference here is to the fact that Muslims always attach an epithet to a Biblical character mentioned in the Qurʾān. Thus, for example, Jesus is addressed as *Al-Masīh*, ›alayī al-salām (the Messiah, peace be upon him). A similarly touching description would be found seven centuries later in the description given by the renowned scholar Louis Massignon when recounting his sojourn in Baghdad. He was lodged at the home of the Alūsī family whose hospitality and affection led him back to the Catholic faith. In a letter addressed to one of his friends he writes: »Si je suis redevenu croyant,

après cinq années d'incrédulité, c'est à des amis musulmans de Bagdad, les Allūssy, que je le dois. C'est en arabe qu'ils ont parlé de moi à Dieu, en priant, et c'est en arabe que j'ai pensé et vécu ma conversion, en mai-juin 1908.« Text quoted in Jacques KERYELL, *Louis Massignon: La grâce de Bagdad*, Paris 2010, 105.

¹⁷ DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 211.

¹⁸ Such a disparaging view of Muhammad is not unique to Riccoldo. One finds similar examples in the writings of Peter the Venerable and Thomas Aquinas by whom our author was probably influenced. See, for example, Chapter 6 of the *Summa contra Gentiles*.

Douay version] has permitted him to lead half the world astray. Therefore I, who am least in the Order of Preachers, suffering greatly at such destruction, »have thought on my ways: and turned my feet unto the testimonies« of God [Ps. 118:59; trans. Douay version adapted according to Riccoldo's text]. Wherefore, having crossed seas and deserts, I reached Baghdad, the most renowned city of the Saracens, where by general custom are held their studies. There I studied both Arabic language and letters. And, having read their law with great care, and having carefully consulted frequently in their schools and with the masters, I learned more and more from repeated trials the perversity of the aforementioned law. And when I began to translate it into Latin, I discovered so many fables, falsehoods and blasphemies so often repeated throughout, that I became disgusted and gave up. Because of my astonishment at the aforementioned blasphemies, I wrote certain *Letters to the Church Triumphant*¹⁹ in order to give vent to my embittered spirit.²⁰

He also visited Assyrian (Nestorian) churches, preaching and debating with the clergy on matters of doctrine. His successful apostolate among them aroused the anger of many among the hierarchy, and in the end he was chased out of the church that they had offered him. However, the Nestorian patriarch Yaballah III intervened and acknowledged the solidity of the Dominican's arguments. He also went against the wishes of his bishops and, according to Riccoldo, continued to allow him to preach freely.²¹

Riccoldo describes in some detail the schools that he frequented in Baghdad in order to pursue his studies in the Qur'ân:

»To say a great deal in only a few words, it must be known that the Saracens come to Baghdad to study from diverse provinces. There are many places in Baghdad which are devoted solely to study and contemplation, in the manner of our great monasteries. Students who come are provided a cell, bread, and water by the community; with this they are content to meditate and study in the greatest voluntary poverty.

In public schools where the Qur'ân is commented upon, only the shoeless may enter. Thus, both the master who explains and the students who listen leave their shoes outside and enter barefoot into the schools with the greatest gentleness and modesty.²²

19 Riccoldo began writing this deeply moving account of his spiritual crisis in Baghdad.

20 The original text in Latin reads: »Hic Mahometus super omnes alios qui unquam fuerunt uel erunt, persecutus est ecclesiam Dei. Non enim uno modo, sed omnibus tribus generaliter efferatur. Vnde modo per tyrannidem seuiendi, modo per legem seducendo, modo per hypocrisim simplices subuertendo, iam fere dimidiam partem totius orbis seduxit permissione dei qui »terribilis est in consiliis super filium hominum« [Vulg.]. Ego igitur, minimus in Ordine Predicatorum, de tanta dampnatione condolens »cogitavi vias meas, et conuerti pedes meos in testimonia« Dei. Vnde cum transissem maria et deserta, et peruenissem ad famosissimam ciuitatem Saracenorum Baldaccum, ubi generale ipsorum solemne habentur studium, ibi pariter linguam et litteram arabicam didici. Et legem eorum diligentissime relegens, et studiose in scholis et cum magistris ipsorum fre-

quenter conferens, magis ac magis, per experientiam apprehendi peruersitatem predictae legis. Et cum inceperim eam in latinum transferre, tot inueni fabulas et falsitates et blasphemias et eadem per omnia in locis creberrimis repetita, quod tunc attedius dimisi, et super admiratione de predictis blasphemias, scripsi quasdam *epistolas ad ecclesiam triumphantem* per modum querelae amaricati animi. « Contra legem Saracenorum, ed. et trad. Jean-Marie MERIGOUX (presentazione Emilio Pannella), in: *Memorie Domenicane* (Nuova Serie) n. 17, Pistoia 1986, Prologue, 62-63. I am profoundly indebted to Prof. Albert Paret-sky, O.P. for the painstaking revision of the translated texts from Latin into English of the *Contra legem*. This description given by Riccoldo bears a striking similarity to the one found in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles*.

21 Concerning this incident Riccoldo writes: »But the patriarch, against the will of the bishops, appointed us to preach the word of God freely in their churches. And so they began to listen and to return to the faith, and they came to us to confess their sins. « DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 210. The Latin text reads: »Patriarcha vero contra voluntatem episcoporum ordinavit quod in ecclesiis eorum verbum Dei libere predicaremus. Et ita inceperunt audire et ad fidem redire, et veniebant ad nos confitentes peccata sua. « *Liber peregrinationis* [16vb]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber17.htm> (11.1.2018).

22 Ibid., 211-212. The Latin text reads: »Et ut multa paucis verbis comprehendam, sciendum est quod ipsi conveniunt in Baldacco ad studium de diversis provinciis. Habent autem in Baldacco plura loca soli studio et contemplationi deputata ad modum magnorum monasteriorum nostrorum; et venientibus providetur in comuni de cella et

Witnessing such a scene Riccoldo would have drawn a parallel with the intricate system of the *scholæ* and the *studia* that the Order of Preachers had in place for the purpose of instructing and providing a solid Biblical, philosophical and theological formation for its members.²³

He is in awe of what he sees in Baghdad, especially at the elaborate organization of Islamic learning and charity and by the zeal and piety of the Muslims he encountered. He is quick to declare that he will refer briefly »to the Saracen works of perfection, more to shame the Christians than to praise the Saracens. Who would not be amazed when examining carefully how great is Saracen studiousness, devotion in prayer, mercy towards the poor, reverence for the name of God and his prophets and holy places, dignified behaviour, friendliness to foreigners, and concord and mutual love?«²⁴

It is more than probable that these laudatory remarks were serving as a reproof addressed to Western Christendom that was being torn apart by incessant wars among the major powers, to say nothing of those that were being waged among the communes in Italy itself, his country of origin. These were usually accompanied by intrigue, plunder and rape.²⁵ And yet these praises did not dim his determination to dismantle what he refers to as the »law of the Saracens«, presumably the Qurʾān. Regarding the latter he applies terms such as »lax, confused, obscure, exceedingly mendacious, irrational, and violent.«²⁶ In spite of such vehemence in his criticism, the author strictly applies the rules of scholarship. His attack on the Qurʾān reflects his profound knowledge of the text. In his *Letters to the Church Triumphant*, Riccoldo repeatedly and emphatically states that he has read the Qurʾān in Arabic.²⁷

He found it easy to communicate with Muslims with whom he initiated discussions on religious matters. Like most missionaries before and after him, he was convinced by such discussions that the study of philosophy leads wise Muslims away from their erroneous faith. On the one hand he praises the schools (madrasas) of Baghdad only to lambast the anti-intellectual policies of the rulers in Baghdad, whom he accuses of doing everything in their power to prevent the people from following the teachings of the philosophers, lest they arrive at the conclusion that the religion which they have been following is false and perverse:

de pane et aqua, et hiis contenti insistent contemplationi et studio in maxima et voluntaria paupertate. Scholas autem communes ubi exponitur alcoranus nunquam intrant nisi pedibus discalciati; unde tam magister qui exponit quam discipuli qui audiunt, dimittunt calceos extra, et nudis pedibus scholas intrant. Et ibi cum maxima mansuetudine et modestia et legunt et disputant. « Liber peregrinationis [16vb]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber17.htm#22> (11.1.2018).

23 The *schola* was the educational institution within every priory tasked with the responsibility of giving a basic ongoing formation to the members of the community. M. Michèle Mulchahey has portrayed very well the rationale behind this institution: »Enshrined in the primitive Constitutions was the requirement that each convent have not only a prior to lead it, but a teacher, the community's ›doctor‹, who would introduce his brothers to the study of Scripture and

to the rudiments of sacred theology. These classes constituted the Dominican priory *schola* ... From the day he first set foot in his priory's schoolroom, newly professed, until he was too old or too infirm to manage it, a Dominican brother was required to attend classes in the *schola* and to take part in its exercises ... Thus the convent school provided a foundational experience for the Dominican friar, and not only in the sense that his study there was the necessary prerequisite for further academic promotion, but because attendance in class was the cornerstone of every day of his life in the order. « M. Michèle MULCHAHEY, »First the Bow is Bent in Study«: Dominican Education before 1350, Toronto 1998, pp. 132-133. The *studium*, on the other hand, provided the most promising friars with an education in intermediate and advanced theology as well as education in logic, natural philosophy, and languages even with a view for missionary work.

24 DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 211. The Latin original states: »Quis non obstupescat si diligenter consideret quanta est ipsis saracenis sollicitudo ad studium, devotio in oratione, misericordia ad pauperes, reverentia ad nomen Dei [17rb] et prophetas et loca sancta, gravitas in moribus, affabilitas ad extraneos, concordia et amor ad suos. « <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/liber17.htm#23> (11.1.2018).

25 These rebukes do not appear to have gone unnoticed. Rita George-Tvrtković refers to the sermons delivered by Riccoldo's confrere at Santa Maria Novella Giordano da Pisa (d. 1311). She notes that the latter »ostensibly uses details from the *Liber peregrinationis* precisely in order to fulfil Riccoldo's stated goal: to shame Christians into good behaviour«. GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, *A Christian Pilgrim* (n. 4), 69.

26 DA MONTECROCE, *The Book of Pilgrimage* (n. 7), 216.

27 See, for example Letters I, II and III.

»Some follow Muhammad, and they are in the majority; others follow Hali ('Ali),²⁸ and these are fewer and less evil; they affirm that Muhammad had usurped by his tyrannical power what belonged to Hali. Some Saracens schooled in philosophy rose against both [sects] and began reading the books of Aristotle and Plato, and began despising all the sects of the Saracens and the Qur'ān itself.

Because someone notified the Caliph of Baghdad, whose name was [...], of this, he built in Baghdad the very distinguished schools of Nizāmiyya²⁹ and Mustanširiyya.³⁰ He reformed the study of the Qur'ān and decreed that whoever came from the provinces in order to study the Qur'ān in Baghdad, such students would have rooms and stipends for necessities from public funds. He also decreed that the Saracens and all those studying the Qur'ān were in no way to study philosophy, nor did they consider as good Saracens those who studied philosophy, since they all held the Qur'ān in contempt.³¹

The above comments concerning the philosophers and their relations with Muslim orthodoxy requires some explanation. It is true that, due to the withering attack against the philosophers launched by al-Gazālī (d. 1111) in his *Tahāfuṭ al-Falāsifa* the study of Peripatetic philosophy was brought to an end. In fact, only the study of logic was allowed and, by the time of Riccoldo's arrival in Baghdad Peripatetic philosophy had already merged into the mystical tradition of Islam. However Islamic philosophers themselves never attacked religion, still less the Qur'ān. They sought the latter's authority in order to legitimize their intellectual and academic pursuits. What they did believe is that philosophers know things intuitively whereas the masses require the symbols provided by religion in order to arrive at the same truth. Other philosophers believed that where the verses of the Qur'ān appear to be in contradiction with principles of philosophy, then such verses should be interpreted allegorically. All of them, however, regarded religion as a social cohesive force; without its laws and systems of belief society would disintegrate.

Following in the footsteps of Peter the Venerable's *Contra sectam siue haeresim Saracenorum*, Riccoldo has no qualms about seeing Muhammad as representing all that is evil in humanity and the Qur'ān as representing all that is perverse as regards doctrine.

At this juncture one has to consider the fact that Mediaeval society was aware of only three religions: the pagan, which had been surpassed by Christianity; the Jewish, founded upon the precepts of the First Covenant which »Christ fulfilled by his actions and by his teaching«³² and which was also believed to prefigure the new and everlasting covenant sealed by Jesus on the Cross; and finally, the Christian which believed in Jesus as the final revelation of God to humanity.³³ With such a vision in mind it is obvious that any doctrine that is not situated within these parameters, or which proposes some form of belief or conduct which was different, if not contrary, to the Christian vision of the cosmos and of society, would be considered a heresy and its promoter an impostor. Furthermore, it is necessary to underline

28 i.e., the Šī'ites, followers of 'Alī b. Abī Tālib.

29 The Nizāmiyya madrasa founded by Nizām al-Mulk in 1067.

30 The Mustanširiyya madrasa founded by al-Mustanšir bi'illāh, the last 'Abbāsīd caliph, in 1233.

31 The original text in Latin states the following: »Quidam enim secuntur Mahometum et isti sunt plures, et quidam secuntur Hali, et isti sunt pauciores et minus mali, et dicunt quod Machometus usurpauit sibi per tirampnicam potentiam quod erat Haali.

Surrexerunt autem contra utrosque Saraceni quidam periti in philosophia et ceperunt legere in libris Aristotilis et Platonis et in ceperunt contempnere omnes sectas Saracenorum et ipsum Alchoranum. Quod aduertens quidam Calipha de Baldacco nomine ... edificauit in Baldacco Nadamyam et Mestanzeriam, scholas solemnissimas et reformauit studium Alchorani et ordinauit quod de quibuscumque prouinciis uenirent in Baldaccum ad studium Alchorani, studentes haberent cellas et stipendia necessaria de

comuni, et ordinauit quod Saraceni et attendentes ad Alchoranum nullo modo studerent in philosophia; nec reputant eos bonos Saracenos qui philosophie intendunt pro eo quod omnes tales contempnunt Alchoranum ... « *Contra legem Saracenorum* (n. 20), ch. 13, 121. See also John V. TOLAN, »Saracen Scholars Secretly Deride Islam«, in: *Medieval Encounters* 8, nn. 2-3 (2002).

the fact that in those times the existence and dissemination of heresy was not understood as an exercise in freedom of expression, but rather as the cause of social upheaval that could threaten political, social and cultural harmony, which was expected to mirror the harmony of the celestial realm. When Islam made its appearance in the Christian world, it carried with it a book that it considers as sacred and which includes narratives parallel to those present in the Bible, some of which were similar and some very different. The book also includes a denial of the two fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith dating to the first centuries of Christianity, namely the Trinity and the Incarnation. Therefore, it was obvious that Islam was initially considered a heresy and its prophet (whose second claim to notoriety was that of having practiced polygamy) a lustful and ambitious impostor or even the Antichrist.³⁴ Hence, it is no small wonder that Dante's encyclopaedic masterpiece *La Divina Commedia* went on to place Muḥammad in the eighth circle of Hell in the company of those who sow discord.³⁵

5 Persecution and internal crisis

And yet Riccardo's mission represents the stark reality of the failure of such an approach. The fall of 'Akka in on May 28, 1291³⁶ to the Mamluk ruler Aṣraf Ḥalil (r. 1290-1293) and the conversion of the Mongol Ilhān Ḡazan from Buddhism to Islam provoked in him not only a profound trauma together with a sense of defeat and disillusionment, but also a veritable crisis of faith.

His agonizing account of the terrible scenes that he witnessed at first hand in Baghdad as well as the spiritual turmoil that he experienced are poignantly portrayed in his *Epistole de prosperitate sarracenorum in temporalibus et deiectione christianorum*, commonly known as *Epistole ad ecclesiam triumphantem*. The work consists of five letters addressed to »the true and living God«, »the Blessed Virgin Mary«, »the entire Church Triumphant«, »the Patriarch of Jerusalem and other Friars Preachers«, and a »divine response«. In the first letter and second letters he breaks down into a heart-rending lament over the calamity that befell the Christians of 'Akka. Those who survived the massacre were no less unfortunate than those who were slaughtered. About this tragedy he writes in Letter II, addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary:

»And it is not only from the bosom of holy Mother Church, but from her very heart, that these Christians have been seized, slaughtered, put up for sale, and sent to Baghdad and other remote eastern regions, in advance of a multitude of captives.

I have diligently sought out and searched so that I might discover by chance one of my Brother Preachers among the captives. But behold, it has been reported to me that all have been killed. Old and young Christians have been sold to foreigners ...

32 Summa Theologiae, Ia IIae, q. 107 art. 2 reply. The citation is taken from ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, Summa Theologiae vol. 30: The Gospel of Grace, (1a2ae.106-114), Latin text, and English translation, Introduction Notes, Appendices and Glossary by Cornelius ERNST O.P., New York 1974.

33 The Letter to the Hebrews states in fact: »In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the ages« (Hb. 1:1-2). This quotation is taken from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version (Second Catholic Edition), San Francisco 2006.

34 See W. Montgomery WATT, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh 1972, 73. See also Richard FLETCHER, *The Cross and the Crescent*, New York 2004, 18.158.

35 See *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno Circle VIII, Canto XXVIII, vv. 22-36.

36 In Letter IV Riccardo states that May 28 fell on a Friday and the time of the capture of the city was three o'clock in the afternoon, the same time Jesus died on the cross.

O Lady, we know that your son is the radiance of eternal light³⁷ and a mirror without blemish, who is pleased by nothing but the pure. But is it more pleasing to him that the holy nuns and virgins have been forced to become actresses and are running all over the world, or that they sing in the monastery of God and are occupied with spiritual ministries? Is it more pleasing to him that the holy nuns and virgins consecrated to him are the slaves and concubines of the Saracens and are bearing them Saracen children, or that they preserve the vow of virginity which they have taken, and by your most holy son (through the passion of the Holy Spirit) conceive holy things in holy contemplation, in order to give birth to the works of charity?³⁸

Riccoldo himself was forced to flee Baghdad only to be discovered by two Muslim Mongols who beat him and even attempted to convert him to Islam. He was stripped of his Dominican habit and was obliged to make a living as a camel driver.³⁹ Like Jeremiah and Job before him he argues passionately with God for having permitted those whom he loved to meet such a tragic end. The question that he continually poses is: Whom does God regard as his friends, the Christians, who sing the praises of His name, or Muḥammad the Saracens who blaspheme it? In Letter III he writes:

»See how this most cruel beast has risen up against us, this bestial and diabolical man Mahomet, and how much honour is granted to his book, and how much power you have given to his people against your faithful Christians, and for such a long time! O Lord, this has been so for nearly seven hundred years! We believed that his movement and power would slow and weaken at the end, because it is a movement and power founded on violence. But behold, in the end it has increased and strengthened right up to now, while on the other hand – O sorrow! – our faith and the power of Christians have weakened.

Certainly you are the strength of God and the power of God,⁴⁰ and it is not possible for you to be weakened by a man. But in my impatience and foolishness, it truly seems to me that if you wished anything of the faith to remain on earth, you would not have released the reins to Mahomet and given him power against the Christians as you have already begun to do for some years now.⁴¹

³⁷ See Heb. 1:3.

³⁸ Letter II: Letter to the Blessed Virgin Mary, in: GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, *A Christian Pilgrim* (n. 4), 147–148. The original text in Latin reads: »Et iam non solum de gremio set de corde sancte matris ecclesie rapiuntur et occiduntur et venales (?) transmittuntur christiani usque Baldaccum [Baldacumcod.] et usque ad orientales remotissimas regiones pre multitudine captivorum. Et circumspectis diligenter et querens si forte aliquos ex fratribus meis Predicatoribus invenirem inter captivos, et ecce michi nunciantur omnes occisi. Senes et parvuli christiani venduntur extraneis ... Et quod omnibus aliis miserabilis est, sanctimoniales et virgines, tuo sanctissimo Filio desponsate, pulchriores eliguntur ex eis et exenia [enseniacod.] mittuntur sarracenorum regibus et eorum tyrannis, ut ex eis generent filios sarracenorum. Alie vero venduntur et distrahuntur et dantur historionibus ut circumducant eas per mundum ad ignominiam christianorum et tui sanctissimi filii Iesu Christi. O Domina, nos accepimus quod Filius tuus »candor est lucis eterne et speculum sine

macula«, cui non placet nisi quod purum. Sed numquid ei magis placet quod sanctimoniales et virgines cogantur esse historionis et discurant per mundum quam in monasterio Deo decantent et spiritualibus ministeriis occupentur? Numquid ei magis placet quod sanctimoniales et sibi virgines consecrate sint slave et concubine sarracenorum, et sarracenos filios generent sarracenis quam conceptum votum virginis conservent, et ex ipso sanctissimo filio tuo, fervore Spiritus sancti, concipiant sanctos conceptus in sancta [254r] contemplatione ut pariant obsequia caritatis? » Epistola II, ad beatam virginem Mariam, f. 253v–254r, in: <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (13.9.2016).

³⁹ Riccoldo himself describes this incident in the following manner: »Dum ergo »fugerem de medio Babilonis«, ecce in exitu Babilonie, in deserto occurrerunt michi servi dyaboli ministri Machometi, habitu tartari sed ritu sarraceni, qui me verberabant et exoliabant ut efficerer sarracenus. Quorum verbera et verba leviter, ymmo quasi pro ludo, sustinuit amor. Et certe si apostoli, prophete et patriarche facti sunt sarraceni, satis et ego possem esse sarracenus! Set quia nec volui nec volo esse, privaverunt me sancto habitu ordinis mei, et tunc assumpsimus vestem et habitum camelarii. Nam camelarium me potuerunt facere sarraceni, non autem sarracenum! » Epistole III, Ad totam ecclesiam triumphantem, BAV, Vat. Lat. 7317 (xv sec. med), ff. 260v., in: <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (13.9.2016). Riccoldo takes up the thread of these laments in Letters III and IV.

⁴⁰ See 1 Cor. 1:24.

Throughout this work one may observe how Riccoldo's faith treads the path of humiliation and is driven almost to desperation. He considers himself abandoned, condemned to a life of desolation in a foreign land, without the consolation of living in a religious community or a comforting letter from his superiors:

»I have been left alone in Baghdad, in the depths of the East, by my companions, and for many years I have had no news from the West about my brothers or my Order. Likewise, I do not know what happened to the master who sent me, because I have not received any scrap of a response to the numerous tearful letters I sent him requesting help.⁴²

In the final two of his five letters, however, Riccoldo appears to accept the inscrutable justice of God, possibly due to the influence of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*, which he had bought in one of the markets of Baghdad together with a blood-stained habit of a Dominican friar. It was most probably part of the booty that the Mamluks had brought with them from 'Akka. In this book he did not find an answer to his grief, but he did accept that God was indicating to him another way at looking at the calamity that befell his fellow brethren and Christians. He quotes Gregory,⁴³ who states that »God says openly that he does not respond to each heart with personal words, but speaks with such eloquence that through this he satisfies every question. In scripture we will, in fact, find all our trials, if we look [...]. Thus in scripture, everything which we endure individually is answered collectively. The lives of those who came before serve as an example for those who follow, and so on«.⁴⁴

Riccoldo managed to make his way back to Italy in 1300 where he retired to Florence, never to return to the Middle East. The total number of years he spent as a missionary-pilgrim in the Orient was approximately twelve. The last news concerning him refers to a dispute between the Dominican community and the canons and secular clergy of the city.

41 Letter III, Letter to the Church Triumphant, in: GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, A Christian Pilgrim (n. 4), 162-163. The Latin text reads as follows: »Et ecce insurrexit contra nos bestia crudelissima, bestialis homo et diabolicus Machometus; et tantus honor exhibetur libro suo, et tantam potentiam dedisti populo suo contra fideles tuos et tanto tempore contra christianos! Domine, iste fere septingentesimus annus est! Et nos quidem credebamus quod motus et potentia in fine ipsius lentesceret et debilitaretur quasi motus quidam et potentia violenta. Ecce autem quod in fine usque nunc semper intenditur et fortificatur. Et contrario, proh [prochcod.] dolor!, fides nostra et potentia christianorum debilitari videtur. Certe tu Dei virtus et Dei potentia es, nec est possibile quod ab homine infirmaris. Mee vero impatientie et insipientie videtur quod si tu non vis quod aliquid de fide in terra remaneat, non habes nisi relaxare habenas Machometo et dare ipsi potentiam contra christianos. « Epistola III, Ad totam ecclesiam triumphantem [261v]; <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (28.10.2016).

42 Letter I, Letter to the True and Living God, in: GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, A Christian Pilgrim (n. 4), 145. The Latin text reads as follows: »Et relictus sum solus in Baldacco a sociis in profundis partibus orientis, et de occidente a pluribus annis aliqua nova non habeo de fratribus meis sive de ordine. Magistro etiam qui me misit nescio quid accidit, quia de multis et lacrimosis litteris quas ei pro succursu transmissi nec cedulam aliquam responsionis accepi. « Epistola I Ad Deum verum et

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43 Letter I, Letter to the True and Living God, in: GEORGE-TVRTKOVIĆ, A Christian Pilgrim (n. 4), 145. The Latin text reads as follows: »Et relictus sum solus in Baldacco a sociis in profundis partibus orientis, et de occidente a pluribus annis aliqua nova non habeo de fratribus meis sive de ordine. Magistro etiam qui me misit nescio quid accidit, quia de multis et lacrimosis litteris quas ei pro succursu transmissi nec cedulam aliquam responsionis accepi. « Epistola I Ad Deum verum et

vivum [252v] <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (28.10.2016).

43 Gregory the Great is one of the many saints Riccoldo implores in Letter III.

44 The original text states: »... ac si aperte diceret: Singulorum cordibus privatis vocibus non respondit, sed tale eloquium construit per quod cunctorum questionibus satisfacit. In scripturis quippe causas nostras si requirimus invenimus. Ita enim nobis omnibus in eo quod specialiter patimur comune respondetur; i<bi vita precedentium fit forma> sequentium etcetera«, Epistole V, Divina responsio; BAV. Vat. Lat. 7317, ff. 266r-267r. <http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/epi.htm> (11.1.2018). At times Riccoldo skips some lines of the *Moralia*.

6 Conclusion

Riccoldo da Montecroce was often the victim of his own fiery character. Jean-Marie Mérigoux refers to a document recording the penance inflicted upon him by a Provincial Chapter in 1316 as a result of the extreme language that he and another friar, a certain Giovanni d'Oltrarno, applied toward their own Vicar-Provincial.⁴⁵ Riccoldo was assigned to the priory of Orvieto whereas John was assigned to the priory of Viterbo. Both had their active and passive voices in any Chapter revoked for a period of one year. However, as has already been noted, the colourful and often harsh language that Riccoldo applies with reference to non-Catholic Christians and Muslims was a common feature in Mediaeval Latin apologetics. What distinguishes him from the mainstream was the fact that he experienced firsthand Muslim belief and practice by living in a Muslim city for the best part of twelve years and he was the first to make reference to his own personal experience. All this makes him stand out as a unique commentator on Islam in his time.

In spite of the apparent failure of his mission, Riccoldo's works have been widely read and translated throughout the centuries since they provided first-hand information on the Muslim world. He was known all over Europe, from Avignon to Constantinople. Pope John XXII (r. 1316-1334), who followed closely developments in the Middle East, had in his possession a copy of his *Contra legem Sarracenorum*. The same work was translated into Greek by Demetrius Kydones (1324-1398) who discovered it during his visit to the library of Santa Maria Novella. The great humanist Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) acknowledged the debt he owed to Riccoldo while working on his *De pace fidei*, whereas Martin Luther (1483-1546) translated the *Contra legem* and was greatly impressed by the profound erudition of its author.⁴⁶

Riccoldo's life and works continue to be an inspiration as well as a warning for Christian-Muslim dialogue today. False starts and misunderstandings will continue to play their part in such encounters. We must accept our human failings as a sober warning against human pretension. Our considerations of past mistakes and failures should not turn into occasions for crying out «*mea culpa*» in paroxysms of self-loathing and abasement. Rather, they should be accepted as fundamental lessons for the future. Our religions differ, but the world in which we live is the same. ♦

45 Jean-Marie MERIGOUX, Les débuts de l'Ordre Dominicain et le monde musulman: Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, in: *Mémoire Dominicaine* (15): Les Dominicains et les mondes musulmans, 69. The text of the decision states the following: »Cum relatione fide Digna nobis insinuatum fuerit quod fratres Iohannes de Ultra Arnum et Richuldus Florentini gratias aliquas rationabiles factas in monasteriis de Ripulis et Sti. Dominici per

fr. Recuperum, prioris provincialis generalem vicarium et cui nominatim et plenaria monasteria nostra per priorem provinciam in nostra provincial sunt commissa, auso temerario et etiam cum verbis nimis irreverentibus et presumptuosis cum hoc minime possent attentaverint revocare, et ex hoc in dictis monasteriis magna turbatio et admiration sit exorta, eos de convent Florentino removemus in penam et fr. Richuldum conv. Urbev-

etano, fr. autem Iohannem predictum Viterbiensi conventui assignamus, et insuper eos preterquam in accusatione sui per unum annum omni voce privamus. « Th. KÄPPELI/A. DONDAINE, *Acta capitulorum provincialium provinciae Romanae* (1243-1344), Roma 1941, 200.

46 MERIGOUX, Les débuts de l'Ordre Dominicain (n. 45), 72-75.