

**Thomas E. Burman:** *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom, 1140—1560*  
 Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press  
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Forty-seven years after the publication of Norman Daniel's groundbreaking work on the making of Western attitudes toward Islam,<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Burman examines a small body of primary sources in order to specifically explore the relationship learned men of Western Christendom had with the Qurʾān as they attempted to translate it into Latin. In doing so, Burman's main concern seems to be a revision of the main thrust of Daniel's "magnificent treatment of how Latin Christians came to conceive of Islam" (4). As opposed to Daniel's well-documented conclusions, Burman claims that "Latin-Christian interactions with the Qurʾān were a good deal more complex than we have long thought" (6). *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom* argues, as one of its main theses, that Christian Qurʾān reading in the period under study was characterized "as much by what I will be calling philology—the laborious study of the meaning of Arabic words and grammar, of the historic Muslim understanding of the Qurʾān, and of its textual problems in both Arabic and Latin translation—as it is by polemic; that these two modes of reading often existed side by side in the mind of the same reader; and that while philology was typically undertaken in the service of polemic (one has to understand a text in order to attach it), it

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1. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: One-world Publications, 1993). This is not to suggest that no scholarly study has focused on this era or on this subject during the forty-seven years which separate the two works; far from it. In fact, there is a large body of scholarly works about this period, as the bibliography in Burman's book so convincingly shows. What is being said here is that Burman's work attempts—in more direct ways than has been done previously—to reexamine the main conclusions of Daniel's work.
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also existed here and there quite independently” (6). In addition, Burman argues that there was a second kind of complexity that characterized Latin Christian Qurʾān reading—a complexity of attitudes toward the Qurʾān and the ways of experiencing it as a text and object.

The four centuries (1140 to 1560 CE) on which Burman has chosen to focus were, indeed, the formative period of Western attitudes toward Islam in general and the Qurʾān in particular. These four hundred years witnessed the appearance of the first Latin translations of the Qurʾān, the emergence of the first serious Christian engagement with the Qurʾān through the works of such influential writers as Peter the Venerable (1092/94-1156), Ramon Llull (1232-1315), Ramon Martí (d. *ca.* 1284), Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1242-1320), Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64), and Alonso de Espina (1384-1456). The period ends as the first printed versions of the Qurʾān begin to circulate in Latin Christendom. Burman does not, however, dwell on these seminal Christian writers; he deliberately turns away from them in order to focus on a “handful of known Latin translators as they worked” (8); these include Robert of Ketton (1110-1160), Mark of Toledo (fl. 1193-1216), Flavius Mithridates (fl. 1775-85), and on the two surviving manuscripts of the bilingual Qurʾān produced in 1518 under the auspices of Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo (1470-1532).

In choosing to focus on these translators and their activity, Burman’s goal has been to show that their engagement with the Qurʾān was, actually, much like that of the medieval Muslim translators of the Qurʾān (8), “for if we look at these Latin versions of the Qurʾān side by side with late medieval Castillian versions made by Iberian Muslims, we cannot help but notice that all these translators—both Christian and Muslim—freely turn to authoritative Muslim exegetical sources and interpolate words and phrases from them into their translations” (8).

Burman, thus, attempts to fuse two the polemical and the somewhat rarified philological interests of Latin Christian attitudes toward the Qurʾān. The former is already well-established, the latter (a motive-free, purely academic activity) signals a bold and new attempt which tries to grafting onto the well-established scholarly consensus a new dimension of Medieval Christian approaches to the Qurʾān. The author, however, fails in his attempt to revise the scholarly consensus; even he himself does not seem to be convinced of what he has set out to do, and hence the need to continuously qualify his overstatement with remarks like the following: “What we see here, indeed, is rather thoroughgoing philology. What they produced was by no means always good, but the problems with their trans-

lations have much less to do with intentional distortion of the Qurʾān than with varying philological ability” (8). While replete with overstatements,<sup>2</sup> Burman’s work does have its value, especially in terms of providing glimpses of the psychological, linguistic, and theological concerns of those Latin translators whose works he examines, even though these glimpses often contradict the author’s claims:

Browsing through the pages of Robert’s translation as it appears here...what strikes one is not so much the text itself, as all the stuff that surrounds it. Abundant notes, written in a careful hand, litter the margins of many folios. They thunder with hostility: their favorite noun seems to be *mendax* (“liar”), the preferred adjective *stultissimus* (“extremely stupid”). In place of the Qurʾān’s usual surah titles, someone has concocted a series of mocking rubrics: “Surah Thirty-One, Enveloped in Absurd Lies and the Characteristic Repetition of Incantations.” The bright red ink of these vicious titles has also been employed on folio 11 to draw a portrait of Muhammad “under the form,” the library’s modern catalogue succinctly informs us, “of a monstrous fish with a human head,” probably meant to make Christian readers imagine Muhammad as a seductive and dangerous siren of false doctrine. (60)

What is most striking in *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom* is the author’s attempt to turn a tool into a goal: philology, while certainly complex and sophisticated, was used as a tool by the translators and polemicists of the Latin Christendom to provide credence to their attempts to distort the message of Islam, to diabolize it using its own language and interpretive tradition, to make it sound as wrongheaded and as fully un-Christian as possible. In his desire to revise the established scholarly conclusions about the attitude of Latin Christendom toward the Qurʾān, Burman casts this philological activity as a proof of serious engagement of these Latin translators with the text of the Qurʾān. No one has ever suggested that it was not a serious engagement, but what Daniel and other scholars have shown is that it was a serious engagement with a specific pre-conceived goal—an engagement which was to cast a die that has remained firmly established in Western studies of the Qurʾān for centuries.

It is already well-known that Latin translators used a tremendous

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2. For instance, what does it mean to say that “the Qurʾān was a best-seller in medieval and early modern Europe”? After all, it was an era during which the Qurʾān circulated only in manuscript form among a small number of Christian scholars and collectors.

amount of Muslim material in their translations and interpretations of the Qurʾān, but to state that in this their approach was like the “medieval Muslim translators” (8) is to completely miss the point; what medieval Muslim translators did with the exegetical tradition was far different than what their Christian contemporaries were doing. Likewise, to conclude that the Qurʾān was a “best-seller” in Latin Christendom on the basis of a few manuscripts found in the homes of wealthy collectors “who enjoyed being surrounded by books” (145) is to mislead, rather than inform, for what one understand from phrases like “a serious engagement with the Qurʾān” is not the presence of copies of the Qurʾān in classicized format in the personal libraries of Renaissance book collectors but a general and wide-spread scholarly interest in the Qurʾān; there is no such evidence in either Burman’s book or elsewhere.

While it is true that there is evidence of philological engagement with the text of the Qurʾān among certain Christian scholars of this period and there were collectors who wanted a copy of the Qurʾān, Burman fails to see that all of this took place within a larger religious and intellectual milieu in which there was no room for a dispassionate, purely scholarly study of the Qurʾān. This is all the more strange because Burman had himself highlighted elsewhere what he glosses over in this book.<sup>3</sup>

When all is said and done, perhaps the most important aspect of the enterprise of Latin translations of the Qurʾān was that those who undertook these projects did so because they were commissioned and that those who commissioned them were not really interested in philology: they were doctors of a Church who felt threatened by Islam, or who wanted to convert Muslims, and thus were in need of source material. Robert of Ketton, for instance, a translator of Arabic scientific and mathematical works, “was persuaded by Peter the Venerable to set aside for some time his principal study of astronomy and geometry in order to join a team of translators that Peter was forming to produce Latin versions of the Qurʾān and other Arabic works that might be useful to Latin Christians attempting to convert Muslims.”<sup>4</sup> Mark of Toledo (fl. 1193-1216) was, likewise, lured away from the pursuit of translating scientific works by Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, the archbishop of Toledo (1208-47), “as part of his mobilization of arms and opinion preceding the campaign of Las Navas de Tolosa that

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3. Thomas E. Burman, “Tafsīr and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qurʾān Exegesis and the Latin Qurʾāns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo”, *Speculum* Vol. 73 (July 1998) No. 3, 703-732.

4. *Ibid.*, at 704.

would see the Christian kingdoms of Spain destroy the Almohad army and set the stage for the Christian conquests of the following four decades.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Burman attempts to build a case for revision of the scholarly consensus his book, in fact, adds weight to what has been so convincingly shown by previous scholarly works on the attitudes of Latin Christendom toward the Qur’ān: the existence of a willful, religiously-driven effort to demonize the Scripture of the perceived enemy.

Muzaffar Iqbal  
Center for Islam and Science,  
Sherwood Park, AB  
Canada

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5. *Ibid.*, at 707.