

AFTER THE FALL: RICCOLDO DA MONTECROCE AND NICHOLAS OF CUSA ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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Two very different churchmen, Riccoldo da Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa, though separated by time and place, were affected by a similar catastrophe: the fall of a Christian capital to Muslim forces. Both responded by seeking heaven's help to end interreligious strife, but Riccoldo wrote letters full of questions to the church triumphant, while Nicholas envisioned a celestial interfaith council that solved the problem. Their disparate responses exemplify the diversity of medieval perspectives on religious plurality.

Part of me was urged to sadness over the slaughter and servitude of the Christian people and their degradation after the lamentable loss of Acre, when I saw Saracens prosperous and flourishing and Christians squalid and dismayed.

—Riccoldo da Montecroce, on the fall of Acre, 1291¹

There was a certain man who . . . was inflamed with zeal for God as a result of those deeds that were reported to have been perpetrated at Constantinople most recently and most cruelly by the King of the Turks.

—Nicholas of Cusa, on the fall of Constantinople, 1453²

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¹ Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem*, critical Latin text in "Lettres de Riccoldo de Monte-Cruce sur le prise d'Acre (1291)," ed. Reinhold Röhrich, *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, vol. 2, section entitled *Documents*, new pagination (Paris: E. Leroux, 1884) 264–96, at 264. All English translations of Riccoldo's writings in this article are mine; page citations refer to Röhrich's Latin edition.

² Nicholas of Cusa, *De pace fidei*, trans. Jasper Hopkins, in *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 1994) 33; critical Latin text in *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 7, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Hildebrand Bascour (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959).

ALTHOUGH PRODUCTS OF DIFFERENT CENTURIES, the Florentine Dominican Riccoldo da Montecroce (d. 1320) and the German Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) were both deeply affected by a similar “fall”: the definitive conquest of a Christian capital by Muslim forces. Soon after the Crusader stronghold of Acre fell to the Mamluks in 1291, Riccoldo was compelled to write *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem*, while a century and a half later Nicholas penned *De pace fidei* in response to Constantinople’s 1453 capture by the Ottomans. As the two quotations above demonstrate, the historical events and the authors’ emotional responses to them are remarkably similar. Furthermore, both men turn to the very same place for assistance in the wake of such tragedy: heaven. Riccoldo writes five letters to the church triumphant begging for help, while Nicholas dreams of a celestial interfaith dialogue with God presiding. Both men are so concerned about the perilous state of global interreligious relations that they believe heaven alone can provide a solution. Several other parallels can be seen in their responses: for example, both admit a personal connection to the fallen city, and both were so deeply affected that they felt compelled to write very soon after the fact, when emotions were running high. And finally, their written reflections address a problem only aggravated by the events of 1291 and 1453: the presence of religious diversity in the world.

But there are also differences. While Riccoldo chooses a rare form of medieval epistolary, “letters to heaven,” to express his dismay, Nicholas writes a theological dialogue describing a heavenly council. Riccoldo’s letters are full of questions from beginning to end; Nicholas begins not with questions but with a solution: he envisions an international assembly of 17 different religious leaders, including a Jew, several Muslims, an Indian, a Tartar, and a variety of Christians, all of whom declare via a single spokesperson that the only way to achieve interfaith harmony is for God to create “a single religion in a diversity of rites.”³ Riccoldo expresses a deep dismay that seems on the verge of panic, while Nicholas exudes a cool confidence and approaches the problem rationally.

The striking similarities between Riccoldo’s and Nicholas’s historical circumstances and their initial responses to those circumstances are what

Another English translation of *De pace fidei* (along with parallel Latin text, concordance, and commentary) can be found in James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond, *On Interreligious Harmony* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1990). All references to *De pace fidei* in this article will be to the Hopkins translation and will be cited as *De pace* unless noted otherwise.

³ *De pace* 35. The Latin reads “*Non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate*” (7). For further reflections on this famous line, see Thomas P. McTighe, “Nicholas of Cusa’s Unity-Metaphysics and the Formula *Religio una in rituum varietate*,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Morimichi Watanabe*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 161–72.

first suggest a joint reading.⁴ But the differences that emerge upon further analysis make their “dialogue” across the centuries even more intriguing. My article examines *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem* and *De pace fidei* in light of each other, focusing on one similarity (reflection on the problem of religious plurality spurred by the fall of a Christian capital) and two differences (genre and solution). When read together, these two texts illustrate the diversity of medieval Christian responses to religious plurality. Riccoldo’s attitude is characterized by the ability to accept tension and uncertainty in the face of the “other,” while Nicholas’s is characterized by the confidence that a peaceful solution to interfaith strife is achievable. Despite such opposite attitudes, Riccoldo and Nicholas are similar in one way: both reject more traditional (i.e., purely polemical) approaches to non-Christians.

The unorthodox attitudes toward religious diversity found in *Epistolae* and *De pace fidei* are all the more striking when compared to most medieval literature on the subject, and even when compared to Riccoldo’s and Nicholas’s other writings. For example, Riccoldo is best known for his polemic against the Qur’an, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, which is almost entirely negative and thus much more typical of 13th-century anti-Islamic tracts. Nicholas’s *Cribratio Alkorani*, which explicitly names *Contra legem* as a source, is nearly as hostile in condemning those parts of the Qur’an that Nicholas deemed inconsistent with the gospel.⁵ Rejecting more polemical approaches to religious diversity, *Epistolae* and *De pace fidei* serve as fascinating counterpoints to the standard medieval view—not only when compared to the writings of other authors, but even when compared to their own.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION TO TRAGEDY

Riccoldo and Nicholas both begin by describing the event that compelled them to write. Riccoldo, a Florentine Dominican living in the Middle East

⁴ Other scholars have read Nicholas and Riccoldo together, since in the prologue to his *Cribratio Alkorani*, Nicholas mentions Riccoldo by name and calls him one of his “most pleasing” sources of information on Islam. See James E. Biechler, “Three Manuscripts on Islam from the Library of Nicholas of Cusa,” *Manuscripta* 27 (1983) 91–100; and Jasper Hopkins, “Ricolto of Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa,” in *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning, 1994) 57–98.

⁵ Scholars have, however, noted at least one sympathetic aspect of the *Cribratio*’s “sifting” or “scrutiny” of the Qur’an: Nicholas’s distinctive use of a positive hermeneutical principle he calls *pia interpretatio*. For more on *pia interpretatio*, see James E. Biechler, “A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom* 185–202; and Jasper Hopkins, “The Role of *Pia Interpretatio* in Nicholas of Cusa’s Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur’an,” in *Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa*, 39–55. Critical Latin edition of *Cribratio Alkorani* in *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 8, ed. Ludwig Hagemann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986); English translation by Jasper Hopkins in *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*.

from approximately 1288 to 1300, opens his letters by admitting that he has been moved to tears by the “lamentable loss of Acre.” He sharply contrasts the good fortunes of the “prosperous and flourishing” Saracens with the degradation of Christians who have been killed, imprisoned, impoverished, or enslaved. Nicholas likewise begins *De pace fidei* with reference to an equally, if not more significant, Christian loss, the fall of Constantinople in 1453, although he does not offer as many details as Riccoldo. In fact, Nicholas offers almost none; he merely refers in passing to “the deeds reported to have been perpetrated at Constantinople.”⁶ Nicholas’s matter-of-fact tone reflects the reality that he is more removed, both physically and emotionally, from the fall of Constantinople than Riccoldo is from the fall of Acre. Even though Nicholas tells his readers that he had “formerly seen the sites in the regions of Constantinople,” he was not present in the city when it was taken by the Turks.

Riccoldo, however, is still in the East when he hears the news about Acre. In the very first line of the prologue to *Epistolae*, he confesses that he is weeping about the event while sitting on the banks of the Tigris River in Baghdad.⁷ Even though he was not actually present in Acre the day it fell (May 18, 1291), he nevertheless admits a deep personal connection to both the event and the city itself. After all, Acre was the first stop on his Middle Eastern journey, as it was for most medieval European travelers to the Holy Land, and in fact Riccoldo mentions Acre quite often in his writings. Furthermore, the friar claims a tangible connection to the Acre tragedy: that he discovered the bloody tunics and breviaries of fellow Dominicans—ostensibly from Acre—for sale in the markets of Baghdad, which he ends up buying: “Those who returned from the destruction gave me a habit pierced by a spear or sword, which was also red with a little blood. Thereupon I lamented and cried, and said: ‘this is the habit of my brothers, the habit of my Order!’ And I bought it for a modest price.”⁸

As he struggles to make sense of the disaster, Riccoldo constantly reminds his readers that he is still present in the East as he writes. He concludes each of his five letters with the phrase “*data in Oriente*” or “*scripta in Oriente*,” suggesting that he at least began to compose them while still in Baghdad, even if he might have finished them upon his return to Florence soon after 1300. To Riccoldo’s mind, the place of composition is worth noting. He seems to believe that his mere presence in the “East,” broadly conceived, enables him to sympathize very concretely with the

⁶ *De pace* 33.

⁷ “And so it came to pass that I was in Baghdad ‘among captives on the banks of the Chebar’ (Ezek 1:1), the Tigris. A part of me delighted in the charm of the verdant place in which I found myself. . . . But the other part of me was urged to sadness over the slaughter and servitude of the Christian people and their degradation after the lamentable loss of Acre” (*Epistolae* 264).

⁸ *Epistolae* 278.

sufferings of his fellow Christians in Acre, despite the fact that he is actually hundreds of miles away in a different city. He expresses his solidarity with the friars who lived and died in the Levant; after all, he had recently visited the Dominican residences in Acre, Jerusalem, Tripoli, and Antioch—all cities that eventually met the same fate. He even addresses his fourth letter to the slain patriarch of Jerusalem, a Dominican named Nicholas, and to “the other Friars Preacher killed at Acre.”⁹

Riccoldo’s personal connection to Acre was much deeper and more prolonged than Nicholas’s to Constantinople. The friar’s Middle Eastern travels lasted roughly twelve years; he began as a pilgrim visiting major Holy Land sites such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem and then proceeded to Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, and Iraq. His last stop was Baghdad, where he remained for over a decade. While in Baghdad, Riccoldo studied Arabic and the Qur’an (he even claims to have produced his own translation), and interacted regularly with local Muslims: “[We] conversed with them a good deal, and they received us as angels of God in their schools and *studia*, in their monasteries and churches or synagogues [*sic*], and in their homes.”¹⁰ The “East”—which for Riccoldo was a broad territory encompassing both Acre and Baghdad—was indeed his home, at least for a while.¹¹ It seems that Riccoldo’s firsthand experience of Muslims made his reflections on Islam more complex than those of confreres with no such experience. For example, his *Liber peregrinationis* contains both a six-point condemnation of the Qur’an and a fairly accurate and positive description of seven Muslim practices he calls “works of perfection.”¹² Some of these

⁹ *Epistolae* 289.

¹⁰ Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Liber peregrinationis* 158; critical Latin text in *Pérégrination en Terre sainte et au Proche Orient; Lettres sur la chute de Saint-Jean d’Acre*, ed. René Kappler (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997) 36–205.

¹¹ The most significant studies of Riccoldo’s life and works include: J. C. M. Laurent, “Liber peregrinationis,” in *Peregrinatores medii aevi quattuor: Burchardus de Monte Sion, Ricoldus de Monte Crucis . . .* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1864 and 1873) 101–41; Reinhold Röhrich, ed., “Lettres de R. de Monte-Cruce” 258–96; P. Mandonnet, “Fra Riccoldo de Monte-Cruce, Pèlerin en Terre Sainte et missionnaire en Orient,” *Revue Biblique* 2 (1893) 44–61, 182–202, 584–607; Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d’Oriente di frate Riccoldo da Montecroce*, *Dissertationes historicae*, fasc. 13 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1948); Antoine Dondaine, “Ricoldiana: Notes sur les oeuvres de Riccoldo de Montecrucis,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 37 (1967) 119–70; Jean-Marie Mériçoux, “L’Ouvrage d’un frère prêcheur en Orient à la fin du XIIIe s. suivi de l’édition du *Contra legem Sarracenorum*,” in *Memorie Domenicane* 17 (Rome: Centro Riviste della Provincia Romana, 1986) 1–142; Emilio Panella, “Ricerche su Riccoldo da Monte di Croce,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 58 (1988) 5–85; and Kappler, *Pérégrination* 9–31.

¹² Riccoldo’s positive approach to Islam is similar to that of his Dominican confrere and contemporary, William of Tripoli, who lived in the Levant a few decades earlier

practices, such as prayer and almsgiving, are frequently noted by other Christian authors, but Riccoldo also describes practices rarely, if ever, mentioned by others, such as reverence for God's name and hospitality.¹³

Unlike Riccoldo, Nicholas's time in Constantinople was brief, and he had little if any exposure to non-Christians there. He visited the city just once, in the fall of 1437, as part of a papal delegation promoting reconciliation between the Eastern and Western Churches. As for his language abilities, it seems that Nicholas had, in the 1430s, at least a cursory knowledge of Greek, since he explicitly mentions in the *Catholic Concordance* that he has collected original Greek sources and that he plans to quote "from the ancient originals" throughout the book.¹⁴ However, it is unlikely that Nicholas knew Greek well enough to converse with locals during his ecclesiastical mission to Constantinople.¹⁵ In any case, he was not in the city very long; he was back in Italy by April 1438 for the start of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, which among other things sought the unification of the Eastern and Western Churches.¹⁶

Despite the fact that neither Nicholas nor Riccoldo actually witnessed the events that inspired them to write, both men responded with great emotion. In the short prologue to *De pace fidei*, Nicholas repeats twice that he is "inflamed with zeal" after hearing about the fall of Constantinople, and says that this zeal led him to a "prolonged, incessant meditation" during which he beseeched God "with many groanings."¹⁷ Riccoldo is equally emotional. He admits to feeling both sadness and astonishment over recent events; the phrase "I am stupefied" appears repeatedly throughout the *Epistolae*, from the prologue to the very last lines. And, like Nicholas, Riccoldo's strong emotion leads him to prayer. He declares that his letters are, in fact, "in the form of an embittered soul's prayer."¹⁸

and likewise wrote positively about Islam. For more on William, see Peter Engels, *Wilhelm von Tripolis, Notitia de Machomet: De statu Sarracenorum* (Würzburg: Echter, 1992); and Thomas O'Meara, O.P., "The Theology and Times of William of Tripoli, O.P.: A Different View of Islam," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 80–98.

¹³ The works of perfection are described in *Liber peregrinationis*, critical ed., in Kappler, *Pérégrination* 158–72.

¹⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Catholic Concordance*, Book I, trans. Paul Sigmund (New York: Cambridge University, 1991) 3.

¹⁵ John Monfasani argues that Nicholas eventually did learn Greek—not in the 1430s when he was in Constantinople, but later, in the 1460s. See his "Nicholas of Cusa, the Byzantines, and the Greek Language," in *Nicolaus Cusanus zwischen Deutschland und Italien*, ed. Martin Thurner (Berlin: Akademie, 2002) 215–52.

¹⁶ Sigmund, introduction to *Catholic Concordance* xlv. Monfasani reports that Nicholas was in Constantinople just two months, from September 24 to November 27, 1437 ("Nicholas of Cusa, the Byzantines, and the Greek Language" 215).

¹⁷ *De pace* 33.

¹⁸ *Epistolae* 264.

SAME PROBLEM, DIFFERENT GENRE

So far I have highlighted many similarities between Nicholas and Riccoldo: a similar historical circumstance, a personal connection to the place of tragedy, a deeply emotional initial reaction to the event, and the impulse to write something in response. There is one additional similarity: both seek heaven as the only possible source for a solution. But herein lies also the first significant difference: while both men implore heaven, they do so via distinct genres. Riccoldo addresses his questions to the celestial curia in a letter, while Nicholas writes in the form of a dialogue that takes place—perhaps not surprisingly for a former conciliarist—during a heavenly council.¹⁹

Riccoldo's letters can be classified as part of the medieval epistolary genre, a genre that remains relatively understudied.²⁰ Despite a spate of publications focusing on the letter writing of medieval and early modern women in the last 30 years,²¹ there is still scant scholarship on the kind of letter exemplified by Riccoldo's *Epistolae*. Since his letters are addressed to divine and deceased beings rather than to living persons, they could be characterized as a type of imaginary letter.²² His letters are also unusual for being sent *to* heaven rather than the other way around, and are thus distinct from "letters *from* heaven" (*Himmelsbriefe* or "heavenly letters"), which have roots in the patristic period but became especially popular during the early modern era.²³

¹⁹ "A vision was shown to this same zealous man . . . a council of the loftiest beings and under the presiding direction of the Almighty" (*De pace* 33).

²⁰ A classic source on medieval epistolary remains Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental* 17 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976). Prior to Constable's collection was Jean Leclercq's "Le genre épistolaire au moyen âge," *Revue du moyen âge latin* 2 (1946) 63–70. Since Constable, major studies on the medieval epistolary genre include James J. Murphy, "Ars Dictaminis: The Art of Letter-Writing," in *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of the Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001) 194–268; Martin Camargo, *Ars dictaminis, Ars dictandi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981); and *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies*, ed. Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2007).

²¹ Examples include *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University, 1989); *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. by Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993); and Meredith K. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009).

²² W. G. Doty, "The Classification of Epistolary Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969) 183–99.

²³ For more on the "heavenly letter" genre, see Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2006) 96–105; Irena Backus, "Lettre de Jésus-Christ sur le dimanche," in *Écrits*

No matter how they are classified, Riccoldo's letters are striking for their audacity. The fall of Acre seems to have pushed him to the brink of despair, for he sometimes actually appears to reject Christian salvation history altogether. At one point, he even goes so far as to make the following declaration to God: "If it pleases you that Mahomet should rule, tell us so that we may venerate him."²⁴ The friar seems to be aware that his statements are on the borderline of theological acceptability, so whenever he believes he has said something potentially offensive, he reiterates his lowly status and desperation in the face of dire circumstances. For example, in one letter to God he includes the following disclaimer:

You know that I do not wish to blame you with what I am saying. Rather, out of my impatience I am taking the opportunity to speak with you so that you will instruct me—you who are closer to me than I am to myself. O Lord, I am not trying to penetrate your loftiness, because in no way can I compare my understanding to it. But I desire to understand, if only a little, your mercy and truth, which my heart believes in and loves.²⁵

But Riccoldo's disclaimers do little to take the sting out of statements such as the one above, which seems to consider—at least rhetorically—the possibility that he, a Dominican missionary, might actually venerate Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Despite the great possibility for offense, Riccoldo retains in his letters many near-blasphemous statements such as these.

Riccoldo's audacity might be related to the unusual identity of his recipients: the divine and the dead. One wonders who his intended audience really was. His letters seem to be of the rare type Leclercq calls "*l'epître fictive*," which were never sent to anyone in particular but were meant rather for a broad audience.²⁶ But if Riccoldo intended his letters to be public, which public did he have in mind? Certainly not the church at large; his theology was too questionable. Perhaps he was addressing his fellow friars? At one point he mentions writing real letters to the Dominican master general, but he claims that he never received a reply: "I do not know what happened to the master who sent me, because I have not received a single scrap of response to the numerous tearful letters I sent

apocryphes chrétiens, vol. 2, ed. Pierre Geoltrain and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Alfred Hiatt, *The Making of Medieval Forgeries: False Documents in Fifteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004); W. R. Jones, "The Heavenly Letter in Medieval England," *Medievalia et humanistica* 6 (1975) 163–78; Rudolf Stübe, *Der Himmelsbrief: Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1918).

²⁴ *Epistolae* 271.

²⁵ *Epistolae* 265.

²⁶ Leclercq, "Le genre" 66.

him requesting help.”²⁷ It is very likely that the *Epistolae* were entirely private, and that Riccoldo was writing only for himself. Indeed, in Letter One he says that he has been alone in Baghdad for quite some time.²⁸ But if this were true, where were the friars whom he said had greeted him upon his arrival? Was he now the only remaining Dominican in the city? In any case, his letters almost certainly never reached a wide audience; today just a single manuscript remains.²⁹

It is possible that Riccoldo selected the epistolary genre over others due to its “unusual flexibility in regard to authors, topics, and audiences.”³⁰ Like medieval women authors who used letters to “transcend not only genre but educational barriers,” perhaps Riccoldo felt that he needed to transcend the normal modes of theological discourse in order to respond adequately to the catastrophe.³¹ Extraordinary times call for an extraordinary theological genre, and the epistolary seems to have served his purpose in this case.

Nicholas’s genre and audience seem to be, at least at first glance, more easily explained. First, he has a particular audience in mind. In the prologue to *De pace fidei*, he says he wants to describe his personal vision “plainly” so that it “might one day become known to those who have a say in these especially important matters.”³² He employs the *dialogus*, a genre popular among medieval authors writing on interreligious topics; examples include Peter Abelard’s *Dialogus inter philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum* (ca. 1136–1139), Gilbert Crispin’s *Disputatio Christiani cum Gentili* (ca. 1092–1093), Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi* (ca. 1109–1110), and Ramon Llull’s *Book of the Gentile and Three Wise Men* (ca. 1274–1276). There are also medieval Jewish examples of the *dialogus* such as the *Kuzari* of Judah Halevi (ca. 1140), and Muslim examples such as Ibn Taymiyya’s *The Correct Answer to Those Who Changed the Religion of Christ* (1317). One important characteristic of the medieval *dialogus* is that despite all appearances, its “dialogue” rarely reflects any real discourse, if by dialogue one has in mind a free and honest exchange between two equal parties.³³

²⁷ *Epistolae* 270.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Biblioteca Vaticana MS Vat. Lat. 7317. The manuscript is in poor condition; the most recent critical Latin edition was published in 1884 (see n. 1 above).

³⁰ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister* 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *De pace* 33.

³³ On the medieval *dialogus* genre, see Amos Funkenstein, “Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages,” *Viator* 2 (1971) 373–82 and Gilbert Dahan, *The Christian Polemic against the Jews in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1998). Funkenstein and Dahan are describing medieval Christian arguments against Jews, but the genre is also used in arguments against Muslims.

Rather, the dialogue is more often than not “a fictive construction.”³⁴ That is, the words placed into the mouths of non-Christians by the Christian author seldom represent the other religions authentically. Instead, Muslims or Jews often say things that reflect negatively on their own tradition and demonstrate the superiority of Christianity.³⁵ For example, Ramon Llull’s Jewish interlocutor says that studying the Talmud is a waste of time because it “impedes us from having any knowledge of the next world”—it is difficult to imagine a real Jew ever saying this.³⁶

Several similar statements can be found in *De pace fidei*. For example, Nicholas has his Indian interlocutor call the Romans “very prudent” but his own coreligionists “idolatrous,” while the Jew declares, amazingly, that the “Superblessed Trinity . . . cannot be denied.”³⁷ The *dialogus* genre might seem at first to be relatively tolerant, since it often describes a polite conversation between the adherents of two or more religions, appears to allow the other a chance to speak, and is usually devoid of blatant invective. But the genre is generally no less polemical than texts that are unequivocal in denouncing non-Christians.³⁸ Even though the *dialogus* feigns to have Muslims and Jews speak for themselves, in actuality it is a form of polemic that almost always presents other religions in a negative light.

A question now arises. If Nicholas’s dialogue in *De pace fidei* is indeed a fiction (as the majority of medieval “dialogues” are), one might ask how different it really is from the imaginary conversation Riccoldo has with God in his letters. Perhaps it is actually the case that the two texts differ only in their conclusion: Riccoldo ends with unanswered questions, while Nicholas offers solutions. Maybe so, but a distinction in form remains: Riccoldo follows the standard five-part epistolary formula dictated by the medieval *ars dictaminis* (rules of letter composition),³⁹ while Nicholas

³⁴ Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration, c. 1000–c. 1550* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000) 26.

³⁵ This was done to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the author’s goals and approach to dialogue. Nederman highlights the diversity found within the medieval *dialogus* genre and distinguishes between a “dialogue of demonstration” and a “dialogue of mutual edification” (*Worlds of Difference* 25–37).

³⁶ Ramon Llull, *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, ed. and trans. Anthony Bonner, in *Selected Works of Ramon Llull*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1985) 91–304, at 177–78.

³⁷ *De pace* 44 and 46, respectively.

³⁸ Examples of more overtly polemical medieval texts—revealed in their titles alone—include Peter the Venerable’s *Liber adversus Judaeorum inveteratam duritiam* (“Against the inveterate stubbornness of the Jews”) and Ramon Martí’s *Pugio fidei adversus Mauros et Judaeos* (“The dagger of faith against Moors and Jews”).

³⁹ The five parts of a letter as derived from the anonymous *Rationes dictandi*, ca. 1135, are: the *salutatio*, a greeting “consistent with social rank”; the *exordium*, “securing of good will”; the *narratio*, “an orderly account of the matter under discussion”; the *petitio*, a specific request; and the *conclusio*, a brief repetition of

begins with a frame narrative in which God calls 17 wise leaders to heaven for a council (although he never uses the word “*dialogus*”),⁴⁰ and then proceeds to assign specific identities (e.g., “the Greek” and “the Persian”) to the various “positions” presented throughout the rest of the text. A distinction in genre is indeed evident.

But does the distinction matter? Is it ultimately inconsequential, since *Epistolae* is a monologue and *De pace fidei* is a monologue masquerading as a dialogue? I would argue that distinguishing between the epistolary and *dialogus* genres does matter, since scholars have traditionally focused too heavily on polemical texts like Riccoldo’s *Contra legem*, and only recently have begun to realize that such texts do not adequately represent the full spectrum of medieval Christian views of the other.⁴¹ Scholars are now examining theological reflections on religious plurality found in other genres such as biblical commentaries, pilgrimage accounts, letters, etc. What is particularly interesting about *De pace* is that Nicholas employs a traditional medieval polemical genre, the *dialogus*, but uses it to couch innovative ideas such as “*religio una in rituum varietate*,” and the connection between religion and nationality.⁴²

So now the question becomes whether Nicholas is part of the medieval polemical tradition. It would seem that he straddles the line between medieval and modern worlds. While some have heralded Nicholas as a harbinger of modern tolerance,⁴³ the fact that *De pace fidei* is written as a *dialogus* suggests that he is very much in continuity with the medieval period, for his interlocutors’ statements are just as contrived as those found in the earlier dialogues of Abelard, Crispin, and

the *narratio* meant to “impress the recipient’s memory.” See Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* 220–23.

⁴⁰ Nicholas does use the words “council” (*in concilio*) and “assembly” (*in coetu*) in *De pace* 33, and “assemble” (*confluent*) in *De pace* 70 (see Klibansky’s Latin edition of *De pace* 4 and 63, respectively).

⁴¹ E.g., Thomas E. Burman (*Reading the Qur’an in Latin Christendom* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007] 5) underscores the “limitations of the polemic sources and the narrow view of the human personality they engender.” Deborah L. Goodwin (*Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew* [Leiden: Brill, 2006] 95–99) stresses the false distinction made between polemical and non-polemical texts.

⁴² Nederman suggests that “Nicholas’s distinctive contribution was to connect his critique of intolerance to differences of nationality” (*Worlds of Difference* 89).

⁴³ E.g., Biechler and Bond state: “*De pace fidei* was, in all of medieval Christendom, a uniquely tolerant and reconciling response” (*Interreligious Harmony* xxxvi), and rightly describe the complex nature of Nicholas’s unique brand of tolerance (*ibid.* xxv–xxxvi). See also Morimichi Watanabe, “Nicholas of Cusa and the Idea of Tolerance,” in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1970) 409–18; and Inigo Bocken, “Toleranz und Wahrheit bei Nikolaus von Kues,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 105 (1998) 241–66.

Llull.⁴⁴ Yet there is a difference. The *dialogus* found in *De pace fidei* is more complicated than the others, in that it displays the characteristics of two kinds of dialogue.⁴⁵ The first is the “dialogue of demonstration,” which tries to convince readers of the absolute truth of the author’s position; this can be seen in Nicholas’s neat conclusion, “*non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate.*” But *De pace fidei* also displays characteristics of the “dialogue of mutual edification,” because it sometimes allows its participants (fictional though they may be) “an open-ended opportunity to pursue their disagreements with an extended and deepened understanding of their interlocutors’ convictions.”⁴⁶ There are a few places in *De pace fidei* where Nicholas does this; for example, in the middle of a discussion about Christ’s human nature, he places a fairly accurate description of the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* (oneness of God) into the mouth of the Persian: “We do not admit that Christ was God, who has no participant.”⁴⁷ Thus Nicholas is also somewhat modern, not only because of his novel approaches to non-Christians in other writings (e.g., his use of *pia interpretatio* in *Cribratio*⁴⁸), but also because of his attempt in *De pace fidei* to transform an older genre, the *dialogus*, into something new.⁴⁹

But Nicholas is not entirely successful in his attempt. For despite what appears to be a truly expansive diversity of religions (17 participants!), in reality there is very little plurality on display at all, a fact others have noted.⁵⁰ Indeed, in *De pace fidei*, most of what his interlocutors say reveals

⁴⁴ Many have noted Llull’s influence on Nicholas in interreligious matters; see especially Bonner’s introduction to Ramon Llull, *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramón Llull Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1994) 63–64; James E. Biechler, “Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist, 2004) 270–96; and Theodor Pindl-Büchel, “The Relationship between the Epistemologies of Ramon Lull and Nicholas of Cusa,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990) 73–87.

⁴⁵ Pim Valkenberg makes a similar observation about *Cribratio*, noting that Nicholas “employs different hermeneutical strategies simultaneously” 27. See his “Sifting the Qur’an: Two Forms of Interreligious Hermeneutics in Nicholas of Cusa” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, ed. David Cheetham et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011) 27–48.

⁴⁶ Nederman, *Worlds of Difference* 27. The distinction between these two kinds of dialogue is Nederman’s.

⁴⁷ *De pace* 50.

⁴⁸ See n. 5 above on *pia interpretatio*; and Biechler, “Interreligious Dialogue” 285–89.

⁴⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee, whose probing questions helped me refine this section.

⁵⁰ Pauline Moffitt Watts, “Talking to Spiritual Others: Ramon Llull, Nicholas of Cusa, Diego Valadés,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed.

more about *Christian* views of religious diversity than it does about the details of any non-Christian religion. In short, it is Nicholas's own theology of religions that can be detected here. To cite just one example, Nicholas has the Tartar (Mongol) say: "The numerous and simple Tartars who worship the one God as best they know how, are amazed at the variety of rites on the part of others who also worship this same God with them."⁵¹ The key phrase here is "others who also worship this same God with them"; with these words, it would seem that Nicholas is not only acknowledging that some non-Christian religions worship one God, but that they worship the *same* one God that Christians do.⁵² It is not really a Tartar who is acknowledging other religions to be monotheistic or who is amazed at the "variety of rites" (i.e., the reality of religious pluralism); rather, it is Nicholas himself.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Despite their differences, both men turn to the same place—heaven—for a solution to interreligious strife on earth. But the solution each offers is unique. Riccoldo, who has unabashedly declared that his goal is to "nullify the perfidy of Mahomet,"⁵³ believes that the mere presence of Islam is the source of the problem; his solution is simply to eliminate the religion by proving its falsity.⁵⁴ The friar attempts to contribute to Islam's demise through his own writings; his *Epistolae* contain in embryonic form many of the very same arguments he would develop later in his more polished and

Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 203–18, at 212; and Biechler and Bond, *Interreligious Harmony* xiii–xiv. Biechler and Bond suggest that Nicholas meant for the dialogue to remain theoretical, and that is why he "wisely allowed the matter to remain in heaven without any earthly resolution" (xxix). However, Nicholas's practical intention is clearly stated at the beginning of *De pace fidei*, where he states a hope that his book "might one day become known to those who have a say in these especially important matters" (*De pace* 33).

⁵¹ *De pace* 66.

⁵² The question of whether other adherents of other religions (even monotheistic ones like Judaism and Islam) worship the same God that Christians do is not only a medieval one—see Jon D. Levenson, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?," *Christian Century* 121.8 (April 20, 2004) 32–33. Nicholas himself answers the question affirmatively in a sermon given on Christmas Day in 1430, where he discusses the etymological similarities between the names of God in various languages. See *Sermo* I.5, in *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 16, fasc. 1, *Sermones*, ed. R. Haubst, M. Bodewig, and W. Krämer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1970–1985) 6.

⁵³ Riccoldo uses variations of the phrase "*cum desideraremus euacuare perfidiam Maccometti*" frequently in both *Epistolae* and *Liber peregrinationis*.

⁵⁴ Although Riccoldo is in Baghdad ostensibly as a missionary, his main goal does not seem to be to convert Muslims, but to prove Islam wrong. *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, his *magnum opus*, exemplifies his method.

more popular treatise, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, a book that would have considerable influence not only on Nicholas but also on others such as Martin Luther, who liked it so much that he translated it into German.⁵⁵

However, the anti-Islamic argument found in Riccoldo's *Epistolae* is not as effective or consistent as the one in *Contra legem*, for the letters ask more questions than they answer. Traumatized by the destruction of Acre, not to mention the near obliteration of the Eastern Christian population, Riccoldo responds in an unusual way. He neither incorporates Islam into already existing plans of Christian salvation history nor creates a new historical scheme as many other medieval Christians had done.⁵⁶ Instead, he questions the entire idea of a salvation history in which Christianity reigns supreme. He actually entertains the possibility that the Qur'anic view of history, one in which Islam dominates both temporally and spiritually, may be correct. His profound questioning of Christian salvation history is implicit in the following five questions found in the *Epistolae*: Does God "pray for" Muhammad? Were the Old Testament patriarchs really Saracens? Will all Christians renounce Christ? Will Christ himself become a Muslim on the last day? Is the Qur'an really the word of God? All five questions are rooted in Muslim claims,⁵⁷ and due to recent events, Riccoldo seriously considers whether or not they could actually be true. At one point he even seems to be trying to talk himself out of converting to Islam:

Nor do I wish to become a Saracen. "But where can I go from your spirit, where can I flee from your face" (Psalm 139:7), if you have decreed that the whole world should be Saracen? I certainly cannot consent to such an iniquitous law, nor can I

⁵⁵ For the critical Latin edition, see Riccoldo de Monte di Croce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, in *Memorie Domenicane*, vol. 17 n.s., *Fede e controversia nel '300 e '500* (Pistoia: Centro Riviste della Provincia Romana, 1986) 60–142. See also Mérigoux, "L'ouvrage d'un frère prêcheur en Orient à la fin du XIIIe siècle," in *ibid.* 1–58. On Martin Luther's engagement with Islam see Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Francisco mentions Luther's reliance on Riccoldo.

⁵⁶ Riccoldo does follow many medieval theologians, including Peter the Venerable, Joachim of Fiore and his followers, and Roger Bacon (and John of Damascus before all of them) in calling Muhammad a "precursor to the antichrist." On the incorporation of Islam into Christian schemes of history, see, e.g., David Burr, "Antichrist and Islam in Medieval Franciscan Exegesis," in *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, ed. John V. Tolan (New York: Garland, 1996) 131–52.

⁵⁷ At least, Riccoldo *believes* these to be Muslim claims. But he is not entirely correct. For example, to say that God "prays" for Muhammad is nonsensical and foreign to Islamic doctrine. The claim is most probably based on a misreading of Sura 33:56 ("Allah and his angels send blessings on the Prophet"). For an extended discussion of Riccoldo's mistake, see Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1960) 338.

believe that it is the law of God. . . . Certainly if the apostles, prophets, and patriarchs became Saracens, then it would be acceptable for me to become a Saracen too. . . . But I do not wish to become a Saracen.⁵⁸

By questioning the traditional Christian scheme of history—and actually accepting, at least temporarily, some Muslim claims in its place—Riccoldo reveals the true depths of his despair. And his self-proclaimed “stupefaction” is never really resolved, at least in the *Epistolae*, for he begins and ends with the same questions. Down to the very last lines of Letter Five, Riccoldo admits that he “remains in the same doubt,” and concludes: “I am still awaiting affectionately and ceaselessly for your [God’s] practical response.”⁵⁹

Nicholas, on the other hand, begins with a solution. After just a few lines describing his dismay over the fall of Constantinople, he seems to have come to an immediate understanding of the entire situation. He agrees with Riccoldo that religious diversity is the source of conflict, but believes that the conflict could end if the various spiritual leaders would only come together and agree on the “essentials” of religion:

One leader on behalf of all uttered the following; “If you [God] will deign to do the foregoing, the sword will cease, as will also the malice of hatred and all evils; and all will know that there is only one religion in a variety of rites” [*non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate*].⁶⁰

This famous phrase, “one religion in a variety of rites,” has sparked a lively debate among Cusanus scholars. Some have suggested that it reveals Nicholas’s modern-looking, pluralist outlook, in which all religions are diverse manifestations of a “larger, profounder, universal one-and-the-same faith ‘presupposed everywhere.’”⁶¹ Others argue that for Nicholas, Christianity is neither a compilation of all other religions nor one among many expressions of “some *Ur-religion*.”⁶² Still others say that Nicholas’s stance toward religious diversity is more complex, in that he still “abides by his Christian convictions, but he interprets them in a way that embraces the convictions of all honest thinkers.”⁶³ It has been suggested that Nicholas is able to be both faithful to Christianity and open to the truths in other religions “by climbing to a high degree of abstraction, to a viewpoint, namely, where he can speak of Truth itself as distinct from truths.”⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *Epistolae* 284.

⁵⁹ *Epistolae* 296.

⁶⁰ *De pace* 35.

⁶¹ Biechler and Bond, *Interreligious Harmony* xxxviii.

⁶² McTighe, “Nicholas of Cusa’s Unity-Metaphysics” 172.

⁶³ William Hoye, “The Idea of Truth as the Basis for Religious Tolerance according to Nicholas of Cusa with Comparisons to Thomas Aquinas,” in *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspective on Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Inigo Bocken (Leiden: Brill, 2004) 172.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 173.

But is it possible to speak of truths as distinct from Truth, rites as distinct from religion, praxis as distinct from belief, external superficialities as distinct from internal essence? What of "*lex orandi lex credendi*," i.e., the idea that rites are not simply external expressions of internal faith but are, in fact, acts that themselves shape faith? When Nicholas says that ritual unity "would be difficult" and therefore recommends "that peace be established with respect to faith and the law of love, while we mutually tolerate rites,"⁶⁵ he appears to be echoing a statement of unclear origins: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity."⁶⁶

But what are the essentials? Nicholas spends the bulk of *De pace fidei* trying to answer this very question. For he believes that if he can articulate the essentials of the "one faith," he will achieve his ultimate goal of world peace.⁶⁷ But what does this "one faith" look like? According to *De pace fidei*, it includes several interrelated components. The most fundamental basis for the one faith is the unity of truth: "Since truth is one and since it cannot fail to be grasped by every free intellect, all the diverse religions will be led unto one orthodox faith."⁶⁸ This statement lends credence to William Hoye's claim that for Nicholas, "Truth is even more fundamental than faith."⁶⁹ Nicholas goes on to argue that truth is one because wisdom is one: "There can be only one Wisdom . . . for oneness is prior to all plurality."⁷⁰ Furthermore, he contends, there is an essential relationship between wisdom and the Word: he begins by asserting that "the Word is not present outside Wisdom," and ends by equating Christ and the Word. Nicholas eventually declares that the one faith also presupposes a triune God, a doctrine that is enthusiastically affirmed even by the Jew, Arab, and Scythian, the last of whom declares: "There can be no difficulty in adoring the most simple Trinity, which even nowadays all who worship gods adore."⁷¹

Nicholas concludes his outline of the one faith with the simple declaration that Christ is God. Quite surprisingly, the Persian interlocutor agrees, adding that even "the Arabs can be led to receive this faith [that Christ is God]; for through it God's oneness, which they especially seek to safeguard . . . is fully

⁶⁵ *De pace* 66.

⁶⁶ This phrase has been attributed to a variety of authors from Augustine to the 17th-century Puritan Richard Baxter. Pope John XXIII references it in his encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram* (1959) but does not give a source: "This common saying expressed in various ways and attributed to various authors must be recalled with approval: 'in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.'" Interestingly, the subject matter of the pope's encyclical is peace and unity among nations and faiths—a sentiment very much in the spirit of *De pace fidei*.

⁶⁷ *De pace* 71.

⁶⁸ *De pace* 37.

⁶⁹ Hoye, "Idea of Truth as the Basis for Religious Tolerance" 171.

⁷⁰ *De pace* 38.

⁷¹ *De pace* 47.

preserved.”⁷² Indeed, Christ is the key to Nicholas’s “one faith”; no less than five times does he explicitly state that this faith “presupposes Christ.”⁷³ Nicholas’s focus on Christ, even within the interreligious context of *De pace fidei* is not surprising, given his Christocentric approach in most of his other writings. For Nicholas, “all mankind is united, therefore, not in an explicit belief in Jesus Christ . . . but in a longing for him, regardless of one’s particular religion.”⁷⁴ Besides Christ’s divinity, another key element of his “one faith” is baptism, which he says is required of those adults who are able to obtain it.⁷⁵

By emphasizing Christ’s divinity and the necessity of baptism, it would seem that for Nicholas the “one faith” is nothing other than Christianity. But there are places in *De pace fidei* where the one faith appears broader than Christianity. For example, Nicholas says that the one faith includes belief in resurrection of the body and that this doctrine is shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims.⁷⁶ Furthermore, *De pace fidei* contains an early articulation of the 20th-century notion of “Abrahamic faiths,” the idea that Christians, Jews, and Muslims are linked by a common spiritual genealogy rooted in Abraham.⁷⁷ Nicholas writes: “It is necessary to show that salvation of souls results not from works but from faith. For Abraham, the Father-of-faith for all believers—whether Christians or Arabs or Jews—believed God.”⁷⁸ The concept of “Abrahamic faiths” was generally foreign to medieval Christians, most of whom acknowledged Islam’s relatedness to Ishmael, but not to Abraham.⁷⁹ Even as late as the 1965 conciliar

⁷² *De pace* 54.

⁷³ *De pace* 54, 56, 57, 60, 62.

⁷⁴ Hoye, “Idea of Truth as the Basis for Religious Tolerance” 170.

⁷⁵ *De pace* 66–67.

⁷⁶ *De pace* 55.

⁷⁷ The concept of “Abrahamic faiths” has its origins in the writings of French Orientalist Louis Massignon (d. 1962). See especially his 1949 essay, “The Three Prayers of Abraham” (“Les trois prières d’Abraham, père de tous les croyants”), trans. Allan Cutler, in *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, sel. and intro. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989). See also Neal Robinson, “Massignon, Vatican II, and Islam as an Abrahamic Religion,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2 (1991) 182–205.

⁷⁸ *De pace* 63.

⁷⁹ Hence, another medieval Christian term for Muslims (besides Saracens) was “Ishmaelites.” See John V. Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2008). One medieval text that acknowledges a common Abrahamic patrimony between Christians and Muslims is a letter written by Pope Gregory VII to the Muslim King Anazir of Mauretania in 1076, in which Gregory declares: “We pray both with our lips and with our heart that God himself, after the long journey of this life, may lead you into the bosom of the most holy patriarch Abraham” (*The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII*, ed. and trans. Ephraim Emerton [New York: Columbia University, 1990] 94). This prayer seems to imply the pope’s belief that Abraham is a patriarch to both Christians and Muslims. It could also be read as Gregory’s hope that Anazir will eventually accept Christianity.

document *Nostra aetate*, Islam's connection to Abraham is mentioned but not unequivocally affirmed.⁸⁰

No matter how vague the particular elements of Nicholas's "one faith" are, he seems confident that the leaders of 17 different religions could affirm such a thing; indeed, *De pace fidei* concludes with their doing just that. However, Nicholas seems much less convinced that agreement about one rite can or even should be achieved. In fact, he does not advocate for a single rite at all. Rather, he suggests that "to seek exact conformity in all respects is rather to disturb the peace."⁸¹ Nicholas sees ritual diversity as having a positive effect: "Perhaps as a result of a certain diversity, devotion will even be increased, since each nation will endeavor with zeal and diligence to make its own rite more splendid, in order that in this respect it may excel some other [nation] and thereby obtain greater merit with God."⁸² Nicholas is saying that ritual diversity should not merely be tolerated but actively encouraged. Interestingly, his phrasing here is reminiscent of a Qur'anic verse that likewise praises the presence of religious diversity in the world: "To each among you we have prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, he would have made you a single people, but his plan is to test you in what he hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues" (Sura 5:48). Has Nicholas's theology of religions been influenced by an *Islamic* theology of religions?⁸³

CONCLUSION

Riccoldo and Nicholas both wrote in the wake of catastrophe, and their responses seem strangely similar, at least at first glance. But Riccoldo chose to write letters full of questions. He pushed the boundaries of his Christian faith, and his despair is palpable. Asking God if he should venerate

⁸⁰ According to Georges Anawati, *Nostra aetate* acknowledges the Muslim belief in Islam's Abrahamic origins, but is ambiguous about whether the Catholic Church affirms this belief. The key line in *Nostra aetate* no. 3 reads: "[Muslims] take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God," http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed April 11, 2012). See Anawati, "Excursus on Islam," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Herder & Herder, 1969) 3:152–53.

⁸¹ *De pace* 69.

⁸² *De pace* 70.

⁸³ Nicholas very likely knew about Sura 5:48, for he studied the Qur'an extensively in preparation for *Cribratio Alkorani*. For information about the sources Nicholas consulted to learn about Islam, see Biechler, "Three Manuscripts on Islam." For a discussion of Nicholas's "theology of religions" as found in *Cribratio*, see Valkenberg, "Sifting the Qur'an" 45–46.

Muhammad—even if such a question is merely rhetorical—is shocking indeed coming from the lips of a 13th-century Dominican missionary. And after five long letters full of questions addressed to heaven, Riccoldo seems no closer to an answer. He concludes rather desperately: “As yet I remain in the same doubt. . . . I am asking, I am begging, I am knocking so that it will be revealed to me . . . I am still waiting.”⁸⁴

Nicholas, on the other hand, chose the *dialogus* genre, and while his 17 interlocutors do engage in some debate, he puts mostly answers in their mouths. Their discussion is rational and calm, and participants frequently express agreement after difficult Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation have been properly explained (the difficult doctrines of other religions, however, are never mentioned). Most importantly, the dialogue ends peacefully and easily with a clear and final solution. Perhaps this is all to be expected, given that the dialogue is between “intellectual powers” and not human beings, and takes place in heaven, not on earth.⁸⁵

Which approach to religious diversity is to be preferred: one that recognizes tension and difference and struggles with unanswered questions, or one that places diverse faiths into dialogue with confident hope that agreement can ultimately be reached? It would seem at first glance that Nicholas’s approach is preferable. After all, Riccoldo saw mostly differences between Christianity and Islam, and in fact sought to “destroy the perfidy of Islam,” a solution to religious diversity that one hopes would be rejected by all today.

Furthermore, there are many positive aspects to Nicholas’s approach. First, he is confident that there *is* a solution to interreligious strife, and that this solution can be reached through rational and respectful discourse. Nicholas acknowledges that divine help is required to make this happen; at the beginning of the dialogue, God assures the heavenly council that he will give “assisting and ministering angelic spirits who will watch over you and guide you.”⁸⁶ Nicholas’s confidence that such harmony is even possible is significant in and of itself. Second, Nicholas proposes the twin

⁸⁴ *Epistolae* 296.

⁸⁵ “Therefore in the loftiest domain of reason a harmony among the religions was reached in the aforeshown manner. And the King of kings commanded that the wise [men] return and lead their nations unto a oneness of true worship and that the spirit guide and assist them in their undertaking. Moreover, he commanded that thereafter these wise men, having full power to speak for all in their respective nations, assemble in Jerusalem, as being a common center, and in the name of all their countrymen, accept a single faith and establish a perpetual peace with respect thereto, so that the Creator of all, who is blessed forever, may be praised in peace” (*De pace* 70–71).

⁸⁶ *De pace* 37.

nonnegotiables of “one faith” and “peace” as the double foundation for interreligious harmony. For Nicholas, peace among the nations seems to be at least as important as doctrinal orthodoxy, and more important than ritual agreement. At one point he even expresses an openness to Christians getting circumcised, if such a concession would preserve peace among the religions: “Indeed, if for the sake of peace the majority were to conform itself to the minority and to receive circumcision, then I would deem that this should be done, in order that in this way peace might be established.”⁸⁷

However, the very strengths of this approach to religious diversity can also be seen as weaknesses. First, is it possible that Nicholas is not only confident, but overconfident?⁸⁸ After all, in several places he states how “easy” it will be to get a certain group to agree to a modification of faith or practice. For example, he asserts that “washings occur for religious devotion among the Hebrews and Arabs; therefore *it will not be difficult* for them to accept the washing instituted by Christ. . . . They will *quite readily* consent to their children’s being baptized.”⁸⁹

Granted, this is a heavenly dialogue of intellectual powers with origins in a vision, but does Nicholas jump too quickly to a solution without even acknowledging, much less struggling with, real differences between religions? And second, one of his nonnegotiables is “one faith,” but this one faith is problematic. Nicholas’s one faith could be accused of being so general as to not adequately represent the particular beliefs of all 17 religions in the dialogue. It could also be accused of being too specific, i.e., so Christocentric as to be simply an early version of Rahner’s anonymous Christianity.⁹⁰ After all, Nicholas states repeatedly throughout *De pace fidei* that this one faith “presupposes Christ.”

As noted above, some contemporary scholars have praised Nicholas for being more tolerant of diversity than perhaps he really was. In truth, Nicholas *was* tolerant of *ritual* diversity, which is certainly an improvement over church-dividing arguments about praxis, such as the one between eleventh-century Latin and Greek Christians regarding unleavened bread.⁹¹ And

⁸⁷ *De pace* 66.

⁸⁸ Some might add “naïve”—e.g., Biechler and Bond, *Interreligious Harmony* xxv.

⁸⁹ *De pace* 67, emphasis added.

⁹⁰ Rahner discusses the anonymous Christian repeatedly throughout his *Theological Investigations*, including vol. 6 (1966), vol. 12 (1974), vol. 14 (1976), and vol. 16 (1979). One definition: “The ‘anonymous Christian’ in our sense of the term is the pagan . . . who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ” (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. David Bourke [London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1976] 283).

⁹¹ See especially Mahlon H. Smith, *And Taking Bread: Cerularius and the Azyme Controversy of 1054* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1978).

indeed, Nicholas's acceptance of ritual diversity makes sense, given that in the years directly preceding the fall of Constantinople in 1453, he had been actively engaged in efforts to reconcile the Eastern and Western churches. But in *De pace fidei*, Nicholas tries to separate "rite" (*ritus*) from "religion" (*religio*) or "faith" (*fides*). On the one hand, it is not really possible to separate ritual from faith. But on the other hand, while most medieval Christians believed that ritual diversity "begets divisiveness and enmity, animosities and wars,"⁹² Nicholas echoed the Qur'an by envisioning a way religious diversity could instead engender friendly competition, thus increasing the virtue and devotion of all believers.

While agreement is an admirable goal, perhaps Nicholas achieved it too soon. This is where Riccoldo can be a useful temper. The friar's letters show him to be rather confused, not only by the tragic fall of Acre, but also by his numerous interactions with Muslims over the years. This confusion can be seen throughout his writings, which often reflect a great deal of ambivalence. What else can explain why Riccoldo praises Muslim praxis in one breath and condemns the Qur'an in the next? Perhaps his complex experience reflects more accurately the true nature of interreligious encounter, which sometimes leads to increased understanding between groups, but sometimes—maybe more often—does not.⁹³ Riccoldo's radical awareness of alterity also highlights another potential danger in Nicholas's argument for the "one faith," which seems to erase differences too easily for the sake of unity.

Nicholas's confident solution to the interreligious question, encapsulated in his famous phrase "a single religion in a diversity of rites," might well be moderated by Riccoldo's questioning approach—a tension-filled, ambivalent struggle with the other.⁹⁴ Their opposite accents are instructive: Riccoldo poses questions while Nicholas provides answers; Riccoldo remains in tension, while Nicholas tends to resolution; Riccoldo focuses on particulars, while Nicholas moves to universals; Riccoldo is pushed to the brink of despair, while Nicholas is steadfast in hope. But a conversation

⁹² *De pace* 63.

⁹³ Marianne Moyaert ("Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness: Taking the Vulnerability of Religious Attachments into Account," *Heythrop Journal* 51 [2010] 730–40) notes that the discomforts produced by interreligious encounters are often ignored in favor of the more enriching aspects.

⁹⁴ The maintenance of some tension in interreligious dialogue, in fact, has been suggested as a *bonum* by contemporary theologians. See, e.g., James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist, 1999) 170; Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 198–200. Francis X. Clooney (*Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* [Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010] 29) notes a tension similar to Riccoldo's in the writings of 17th-century Jesuit missionaries in India.

between these two authors suggests something else: that these seemingly opposite approaches might be grounded in a similar attitude, courage. For both Riccoldo's uncertainty and Nicholas's confidence reveal a willingness to move past—or at least complicate—the pure polemics found in many traditional Christian responses to other religions. The remarkable texts of these two men demonstrate that some medieval theologians were capable of responding to religious plurality in ways nearly as diverse as ours today.