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Contact, Confrontation, Accommodation: Jesuits and Islam, 1540-1770

Contacto, Confrontación, Acomodo:
 Jesuitas e Islam, 1540-1770

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The encounter between Jesuits and Muslims in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had as a point of connection the shared engagement with the spoken and written word. But Jesuit efforts both to convert and to understand this “people of the Book” were hampered by the Jesuits’ lack of deep theological understanding of Muslim sacred texts, and by the fact that this faith was not at a sufficient distance from the European Catholic heartland to receive the “longer view” that Jesuits could apply to the religious traditions of India and the Far East. The overstretched commitments of the Jesuits, and the European Society’s emphasis on polemical strategies, which did not prove workable in predominantly Muslim cultures, significantly limited the successes of Jesuits seeking to convert Muslims. The modest gains Jesuits made in the Ottoman and Mughal Empires and in other Muslim societies nevertheless provided narratives of achievement, heroism, and sacrifice that added elements to Jesuit self-presentation and to the narrative of the Society’s progress. Jesuit contacts with Islam continued during and after the Suppression and are still an aspect of the Society’s program today.

Key words: Arab; Bosnia; China; Homiletics; Hungary; Jesuit; India; Koran; Malta; Persia; Ottoman; Pagan; Press.

El encuentro entre jesuitas y musulmanes en los siglos XVII y XVIII tuvo como punto de conexión el compromiso compartido con la palabra hablada y escrita. Pero, los esfuerzos de los jesuitas por convertir y entender a este grupo de la “gente del Libro” se vieron obstaculizados por su falta de conocimiento teológico profundo de los textos sagrados musulmanes. Igualmente, fue un obstáculo el hecho de que la fe musulmana no estaba a suficiente distancia del centro del catolicismo europeo como para recibir una “visión lejana” que se aplicaba a las tradiciones religiosas de la India y el Extremo Oriente. Los compromisos de los jesuitas, así como el énfasis que la Compañía ponía en Europa a las estrategias polémicas, que ya se había probado como poco efectivo en zonas de cultura islámica, limitaron mucho los éxitos de los jesuitas para convertir musulmanes. Sin embargo, los modestos avances conseguidos en los imperios Otomano y Mugal –y en otros lugares–, produjeron algunas narrativas de logros, heroísmo y sacrificio que añadieron elementos a la autorepresentación jesuita y a las narrativas de los progresos de la Compañía. Los contactos jesuitas con el Islam continuaron durante y después de la supresión y siguen siendo una parte del programa de la Compañía en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: Lengua árabe; Bosnia; China; Homilética; Hungría; Jesuitas; India; Corán; Malta; Persia; Otomano; Paganos; Prensa.

The initial inspiration for this undertaking came from the conference “Jesuits and the Peoples of the Book,” held in March of 2010 and sponsored by the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, a gathering which also included contributions on relations between Jesuits and Jews. From several of these papers and from conversations that followed the idea to produce a volume of essays grew. In the months following this conference, the focus on the one hand sharpened on the Jesuit encounter with Islam, while at the same time expanding to range over polemical, political, theological and cultural documents produced in widely varying contexts. New contributions were added, and the project expanded in scope. The result has been a diverse sample of cases from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, originating in widely separate corners of the world, and united in the theme of the encounter of Jesuits with Islam in the period before the Suppression.

There are many ways to approach the encounter between Jesuits and Muslims in the centuries before the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. Theology, homiletics, art, construction of gender roles and even music can all serve as starting points for an investigation of how Jesuits and Muslims encountered one another in the early modern period. Social class, language, and ethnicity are unavoidable aspects of this encounter as well. The contributors of this collection have chosen as a general point of departure the common commitment to the printed and spoken word shared by both groups. This has allowed them to engage many of the above categories, and to look, however briefly, at a very wide geographical and chronological spectrum of events.

The Society from its inception was constantly generating new books and other publications that added to its self-definition and which, while they in no way ever came close to supplanting the Gospel message, re-repressed and clarified this message in myriad ways. As opposed to the Lutheran notion of *sola scriptura*, the baroque Society counted among its literary allies an army of saints, doctors of the Church and newly minted heroes from its own ranks, all of whom expressed themselves in books, homilies and other ways of employing the word. From the very beginning Jesuits realized that in Muslims they had encountered another “people of the book” who also valued preaching and they responded by producing books and manuscripts on how to convert Muslims and how to debate with them. Yet there remained a productive tension between the Jesuit conception of Muslims as heretics posing a

special risk to Christians, and on the other hand, a view of Muslims as pagans, who might be delivered from their ignorance. The former conception focused on the need to disabuse the heretic from his or her mistaken, if sophisticated and elaborated, beliefs while the latter saw the pagan as an idol worshipper who had to be enlightened and raised up to the truth of Christianity. Simultaneously, Muslims were seen by European Jesuits as members of a different ethnic population, often expressed simply as “turcae,” outsiders whose social customs and languages were little understood.

Unlike European Jews, another “people of the book” with whom baroque Jesuits had many contacts, in the Christian imagination Muslims remained by and large threatening in appearance and manner, supposedly posing an existential threat to Christian Europe such as had not been known since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The physical identity of Muslims and in particular the sexuality of Muslim males figures prominently in baroque Jesuit writings about Islam, a reflection in part of the *turcica* literature of the day.¹ Michael Nau (1633-1683) a French Jesuit who had traveled in the Levant and who had considerable knowledge of Arabic, raised questions about the Prophet’s sexual habits, and translated a passage from the Koran (“cap. De Mensa”) into Latin as follows: “At Mahometanorum cum Christianis Faeminis connubia vult esse licita,”² the message being that at least in certain circumstances, the lust of Muslim male is tolerated by his faith. Yet this somewhat ambiguous point received little clarification in subsequent Jesuit writings.³

Jesuit writers struggled as well with the seeming gaps between the doctrines of Islam (as they understood them) and the actual practices of Muslim societies. István Szántó (Stephanus Arator) (1541-1612) left behind a manuscript, *Confutatio Alcorani*, which is the most extended discussion of Islam by a Jesuit active in the Austrian Province during this period, far surpassing Pázmány Péter’s Hungarian language

¹ Falkner, “Having It Off with Fish, Camels, and Lads: Sodomitic Pleasures in German-Language *Turcica*.” See also John Prory in Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism: Representations of Islam in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe,” p. 207-230.

² Nau, *Religio Christiana contra alcoranum per alcornaum pacifice defensa et probate*, 30.

³ Yet as late as the early twentieth century, Henri Lammens SJ could characterize the Prophet as “lascivious,” see Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, p. 312.

work published a few years earlier.⁴ Szántó, who may never have actually travelled in a Muslim land, makes the usual dissection of the “errors” of Islam regarding the Virgin birth and polygamy, but speaks with surprising sympathy about Muslim hospitality and hygiene.⁵ Szántó is also at pains to explain the success of Islam (Christian disunity being in his view a major cause), and asserts that the Prophet is not the Antichrist.⁶ Yet like other Jesuit explorations into Muslim culture, Szántó’s work inspired few imitators and apparently was not widely circulated, and in the seventeenth century a consistent Jesuit approach to Muslim civilizations, as opposed to the teaching of the Qur’an, did not develop.⁷

Jesuit presses did not typically devote resources on a large scale to publications about or for Muslims, although Nau’s *Christiana contra alcoranum* included passages set in Arabic typeface, a rarity in that day. Almost forty years later the Jesuit press in Trnava (Tyrnau, Tirnavia, Nagyszombat) the major producer of books for the Habsburg realms and lands further east, published a work by a Jesuit-trained Bulgarian, Christophorus Peichich, *Mahometanus dogmatice, et catechetice in lege Christi alcorno suffragante, instructus* (Tyrnaviae, F. Gall, 1717).⁸ *Mahometanus dogmatice* may be regarded as indicative of the knowledge of Islam possessed by the best informed Jesuits throughout Eastern Europe, as well as of the tactics employed in proselytizing. This work also sheds light on the reasons Jesuits or other Catholic missionaries might have had for taking on debates about the Koran. Peichich explains in his Preface that “hac arte convincendi Mahometanos” was employed in Sibiu in southern Transylvania, where Muslims were residing, from 1700 to 1703, but notes that the material also can aid in reclaiming Christians who have been lured by, among

⁴ Pázmány Péter: *Az mostan támadt*, eds. Ajkay Alinka and Hargittay Emil (Budapest, Pázmány Péter Catholic University Piliscsaba, 2001), 273-295.

⁵ “...xenodochia, balnea publica, pontes, fontes et vias publicas laipdibus stratas, quia omnia perinde spectabilia sunt apud Turcas...” *Confutatio Alcorani*, p. 148.

⁶ “... iusticiam servant in bello...” *Confutatio Alcorani*, pp. 143, 148-149. The Prophet nonetheless is “praecursor Antichristi” a designation that is not explained, *Confutatio Alcorani*, p. 75.

⁷ Even a Jesuit as renowned as Athanasius Kircher (who corresponded with Jesuits in Tunisia) had to tread with caution when discussing Muslim beliefs and practices, Stolzenberg, “Utility, Edification, and Superstition: Jesuit Censorship and Athanasius Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*,” p. 340.

⁸ Thanks to the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek for making this volume available.

other things, the charity of Muslims, into Islam. This reminds us that the Jesuit confrontation with Islam was frequently about the reclamation of Christians from that faith, one of the Society's themes from its inception. Transylvania is also where Franciscus Partinger (1675-1727) composed an emblematic manuscript featuring images of what were probably Muslim men, and possibly women.⁹ A few years earlier the Trnava press produced a very different sort of volume, *Bossna Captiva*, by a Jesuit trained Croatian, Pavao Ritter Vitezović.¹⁰ This history relates the tragedy of the last king of Bosnia, Stephen Tomašević, who was beheaded by the Ottomans in 1463. Neither a straight martyrdom narrative nor a triumphalist account of Catholic success, *Bossna Captiva* is a regional history in which Muslims figure as villains and the war against them is portrayed as a holy one. The baroque Society's historiography and its construction of the Muslim thus grew together.

Muslims also served as foils for Christian virtue in Jesuit martyrdom accounts in works such as Matthias Tanner, *Societas Jesu usque ad sanguinis et vitae profusionem militans...* (Pragae: Typis Universitatis Carolo-Ferdinandae, 1675). Here Muslims are inaccessible as individual human beings and present only a potentiality for violence and intractability, setting the stage for Jesuit heroism. Yet the death of a Jesuit or former Jesuit at Muslim hands was not always glorious: but as we shall see in the case of Franciscus Feérvary such stories tended to remain buried in the Society's regional records. Jesuit school dramas¹¹ and textbooks likewise referenced Muslim leaders, in particular Ottoman sultans, who not surprisingly were cast in the worst light possible.¹² Memories of the loss of the Holy Land centuries before to Muslim armies and the subsequent struggles of Crusaders to regain these territories were not entirely forgotten; St. Ignatius himself had been born only 38 years after the fall of Constantinople.

⁹ *Ratio Status Animae immortalis symbolice, ascetice ascetice et polemice expressa, quatuor in principatu Transylvaniae receptarum religionum aeternae salutis* Kéz. A. 155 Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Könyvtár.

¹⁰ Geich, *Bossna Captiva sive Regum et Interitus Stephani ultimi Bossnae Regis*.

¹¹ A play on sultan Mehmed IV (1648-1687) was performed at the Jesuit school in Prešov in 1761. Géza, *Magyarországi jezsuita iskolai színjátékok forrásai 1561-1773*, II, 433.

¹² The Hungarian Jesuit Martinus Szentiványi for example mentions an Ottoman sultan, Achmet IV (+1640), who died "crapula" that is, from overindulgence in alcohol.

The fifth General Congregation of the Society (1593-1594) broke with the policy of St. Ignatius and excluded Christians of Jewish as well as Muslim background from becoming Jesuits.¹³ This linking of Jews and Muslims was not accidental, as rumors persisted that *conversos* had aided the Muslim conquerors of Toledo.¹⁴ Christians of “Moorish” ancestry had also been suspected of “terrible customs.”¹⁵ This policy, while not at all surprising considering the general attitude of Christian Europe towards Muslims, also points up the ways in which religions “of the book” were often perceived as more dangerous to Christendom than geographically and theologically more remote belief systems such as Buddhism and Hinduism. On a deeper level the politics underlying the Fifth General Congregation was a response to a crisis over the goals and methods of the Society whose power was reaching its apex and which had confront its role in the secular world.¹⁶ The victory of the exclusionists, of whom the *Praepositus Generalis* Claudio Acquaviva was a leader, was less of a basic redirection of the Society’s interests than a confirmation of the role in which it now was being cast as the defender of Tridentine orthodoxy and educator of European Catholic elites, among whom there was little room for former Muslims.

Yet as the essays that follow will show, the far-flung nature of the Society’s undertakings and the tendency of Jesuits to take the initiative meant that contacts with Islamic cultures were inevitable. French Jesuits maintained a presence in Constantinople in the seventeenth century, although they were decimated by the plague.¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Holderman, an Alsatian Jesuit not only collaborated in the operation of a printing press in the Ottoman capital, but produced the first French language grammar of the Turkish language.¹⁸ Paulus Beke entered Crimean Tatar in 1644, and Joannes Grueber (1623-1680) traveled

¹³ Lacouture, *Jesuits: A Multibiography*, p. 174.

¹⁴ Maryks, *The Jesuit Order as a Synagogue of Jews: Jesuits of Jewish Ancestry and Purity-of-Blood Laws In the Society of Jesus*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Cited in Cohen, “Jesuits and New Christians: The Contested Legacy of St. Ignatius,” p. 28.

¹⁶ O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, p. 189; Bireley, *The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Nilles, *Symbolae ad Illustrandam Historiam Ecclesiae Orientalis in Terris Coronae S. Stephani*, pp. 960-70.

¹⁸ *Grammaire Turque, ou méthode courte et facile pour apprendre la langue turque* (Constantinople, M, DCC, XXX).

from Europe to China overland, passing through Muslim districts in a caravan.¹⁹ At the Mughal court, Jesuits debated with Muslim scholars and introduced artistic themes derived from Catholic iconography.²⁰ In Indian monarchies where Muslims were numbered among the population Jesuits worked with intermediaries to bring about conversions, while in China Adam Schall von Bell feuded with Muslim astronomers at the imperial court.²¹ Maltese Jesuits, Carmel Cassar notes, encountered Muslim slaves from Libya and probably from much further afield as well, and in at least one instance, Jesuits with connections to Malta had traveled far into the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia Jesuits hoping to “encircle” Islamic lands encountered a predominantly Christian civilization that had just emerged from a period of Muslim domination and which still possessed significant Muslim communities.²² But the path was never easy. The mix of nationalities and confessions found in Shamakhi, a city of the Iranian Empire near the Caspian Sea in what is now Azerbaijan, created both crises and opportunities for Jesuits, as Rudi Matthee’s essay describes. Hopes for an alliance between France and Iran against the Porte came to naught, while rivalries with the hierarchy of the Armenian Church, poverty, isolation, and the vagaries of Iranian internal politics restricted the Jesuit mission there. Yet Jesuits used their linguistic and medical skills to make such headway as they could in this hostile environment.

Zvi Ben-Dor’s researches point out another dimension to the understandings that Jesuits had regarding Muslims. In the Chinese Empire, Muslims themselves were not readily identifiable through physical appearance, dress or behavior, revealing themselves (according to Mateo Ricci) only when they refused to eat pork. Since these Muslims seemed in most ways part of Chinese culture, Jesuits such as Ricci grappled with the questions of whether they were “pagans” or “Saracens,” and what their relationship to Muslims in other parts of the world might be.

¹⁹ Shore, *Narratives of Adversity: Jesuits on the Eastern Peripheries of the Habsburg Realms (1640-1773)*, p. 229.

²⁰ Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, p. 35; Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America*, pp. 119-121.

²¹ Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724*, p. 127.

²² Cohen, *The Missionary Strategies of the Jesuits in Ethiopia (1555-1632)*, pp. 38-39.

Systematic contacts between Jesuits and Muslims in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority lands had commenced as early as the Society's mission to Morocco in 1547 and did not end with the suppression of the Society. Jesuits resumed their work in Albania, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, in 1841.²³ William Gifford Palgrave was an English convert to Catholicism who worked as a Jesuit in Beirut and traveled through Arabia in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ Until 1969 American Jesuits operated a college in Bagdad and continue to maintain primary and secondary schools in Egypt.²⁵

In recent decades Jesuit activities in predominantly Muslim countries have faced crises and setbacks. For thirty years Paolo Dall'Oglio, SJ operated a center for interfaith dialogue in the monastery of Deir Mar Musa, Syria, only to be expelled in June of 2012.²⁶ Dall'Oglio returned to Syria shortly thereafter where he was captured by rebels, and, according to some accounts, executed.²⁷ His fate at the time of this writing is unknown. A Jesuit Center is still operating in Aman, Jordan, and the Society continues to have a presence in Algeria. In Persia, the Society had maintained a significant presence in the 1730s when a French Jesuit had been the personal physician to Nadar Shah; in the early 1970s American Jesuits were reportedly close to the wife of the last Shah of Iran. Dutch Jesuits arrived in what is now Indonesia in 1859,²⁸ where Xavier had labored three centuries earlier, and remained after the colony achieved independence ninety years later. Since 2009 Jesuit scholastics have lived in a Muslim boarding school in Java where they have studied

²³ Murzaku, *Catholicism, Culture, Conversion: The History of the Jesuits in Albania (1841–1946)*. Jesuits had traveled in Albania as early as 1689. *Historia Domus Professae Viennensis S. I. 1651–1689*, 2111518, fol. 459v, Archivum Provinciae Austriae S. J., Vienna.

²⁴ Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia: (1862–1863)*. Thanks to Benjamin Braude for calling attention to this fact.

²⁵ MacDonnell, *Jesuits by the Tigris*; Renard, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 230–231.

²⁶ "Syria Expels Jesuit Priest Who Spoke for Change" *The New York Times* June 21, 2012, p. A4.

²⁷ Umberto Bacchi, "Syria: 'Pro-Rebel Jesuit Priest Paolo Dall'Oglio Executed,'" *International Business Times* <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/articles/498510/20130812/syria-jesuit-priest-paolo-dall-oglio-killed.htm> retrieved 3 November 2013.

²⁸ Soejana, Subanar, Hoekema, Sudhiarsa and Steenbrink, "Christianity in Javanese Culture and Society," p. 644.

a curriculum focused on Islam.²⁹ Jesuits have taught in refugee camps in Chad and elsewhere in the Sahel.³⁰ While the aggressive proselytizing spirit of the pre-Suppression Society seems generally absent (with a few notable exceptions)³¹ from these later undertakings, the emphasis on education is a common thread here between past and present.

Continental Europe produced almost all of the pre-Suppression Jesuits who went on to work in Muslim communities, but very few Jesuits of Muslim origin. One of the latter was probably Andreas Neuhaus (1683-1741), who is reported to have had Turkish parents (although his mother may have been born a Christian). Neuhaus, who was captured by Christian forces with his mother when he was two, eventually became a missionary in Venezuela.³²

Among the many positive commonalities of Jesuit conduct recounted in the following essays, risk taking is one of the most prominent. The proposed mission to North Africa that was one of the driving forces behind the development of the Society's Maltese *collegium* must be seen as a very risky proposition. Likewise the willingness of Jesuits based in Hungary to travel incognito through Ottoman-controlled territory both to serve existing Catholic populations and incidentally to seek Muslim converts came with dangers that included the capture and enslavement of several Jesuits. In India, dramatic confrontations with local rulers were no doubt undertaken with the expectation that support, if needed, was forthcoming from Portuguese authorities. Jesuits might be murdered in their own residences by irate Muslims, as Rudolph Mathee notes. Of course each of these encounters could have gone even more disastrously wrong. And while the Baroque Society in general was anything but risk-adverse, there were special dangers in seeking conversions from a religious tradition that regarded apostasy as meriting death.³³ Finally, Jesuits of *converso* descent were taking a great risk when they confronted the hierarchy of the Society as they

²⁹ Soetomo, "Jesuit Immersion in an Islamic School: An Indonesian Experience July, 3-17, 2009."

³⁰ Samway, *Educating Sudanese Refugees: a Jesuit's Efforts in Chad*.

³¹ See the discussion of Father J. J. ten Berge's 1931 critique of the *Qur'an* in Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism and Indonesian Islam: Contacts and Conflicts, 1596-1950*, pp. 118-119.

³² Hausberger, *Jesuiten aus Mitteleuropa in kolonialen Mexiko: Eine Bio-Bibliographie*, p. 348.

³³ Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, p. xxii.

sought an accommodation in the prelude to the fifth General Congregation, a move that ultimately cost them dearly.

Another common thread throughout these essays is the way that the institutional politics of the Society so often turned on the ambitions and rivalries of individual Jesuits. In addition to more scholarly disputes, the colliding personalities of men trained in debate and “agonistic education” kept tensions higher than even the generally polemic-filled confessional culture of the Baroque would have required. The consequences of this ongoing debate were both a heightened visibility for the Society and perhaps increased vulnerability as well. While greater than most other Catholic orders, the resources of the Society were always finite and the more time and energy competitive Jesuits spent debating with each other the less was available to launch projects that would bring them into contact with Muslims, or even to contemplate how they might design such projects. By the eighteenth century to these challenges was being added the attacks of the Society’s opponents and rivals, among them orders such as Franciscans, who had taken up the study of Arabic and of the Koran.³⁴ In the meantime Ignatius’ original vision of converting the inhabitants of the Holy Land increasingly shifted into the background of the Society’s plans and eventually disappeared entirely.

Thus the fading of baroque Jesuit initiative to engage Islam had less to do with premeditated policy of either the Society or of the Muslim polities it might have engaged than it did with external and internal pressures on the Society deriving from completely different sources. Yet as the following essays demonstrate, despite these handicaps the initiative of individual Jesuits perpetuated a modest engagement with Islam that extended into the years of the Suppression.³⁵ It is with the hope of adding to our growing knowledge of these complex and various Jesuit approaches to Islam -and the responses they produced- that this collection is presented.

³⁴ Zwartjes, “Agreement Asymmetry in Arabic according to Spanish Missionary Grammars from Damascus (eighteenth century),” p. 276, 295.

³⁵ The case of ex-Jesuit Don Juan Andrés, who in 1783 published a sympathetic survey of Arabic contributions to Christian culture, is representative of this persisting initiative. González Palencia, “Islam and the Occident,” p. 245. In this connection the interactions of Ruder Bosković with Muslims may also be noted.

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