

Islam as a Heresy: Christendom's Ideological Views of Islam

by Rob Howell

The heresies discussed in the book by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages* cover a variety of types. When heresies appeared across Europe, they were swiftly and often harshly dealt with. Witness the Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade concluding with the massacre of the Cathars at Montsegur in 1244. However, Islam presents a challenge to the student of Christian heresies, for it does not fit neatly into the same category as the Cathars.¹

Henri Pirenne tells us that Islam made that paragon of Christian kings, Charlemagne, possible² and was the force that divided the ancient world of Rome and Greece from the medieval world of Normandy.³ The massive effect of Islam and the nature of the Crusades tend to lead to a traditional view of Islamic-Christian relations as direct opponents. Despite this, a closer examination of Christendom's understanding and policy towards Islam leads us to question that understanding and we see that Islam was not any one thing to Christendom, not even a heresy, but rather a collection of different viewpoints depending on the circumstances of individual Christians. Even the Crusades were not entirely Moslem against Christian, and thus the traditional picture of two monolithic religions competing never truly existed.

Islam was founded in the sixth century by Mohammed, who claimed to channel God, or Allah, in the creation of the Qur'an, the Moslem holy book. Islam had its basis in many ways as Christianity and Judaism, but claimed to be the last great revelation of God. However, the initial Christian response to Islam

¹ This paper focuses primarily on the Christian point of view. Two places to start with researching the Moslem point of view are Henri Pirenne's classic on this discussion, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* and a recently released *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* by Amin Maalouf. This book has some drawbacks in its academic depth, but is a very readable start to shift viewpoints from the West to Islamic way of thinking. There are also some further titles listed to provide more and better academic research.

² Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), 234.

³ *Ibid.*, 284.

was relatively apathetic. "Nothing is more striking on a close observation than the extremely slow penetration of Islam as an intellectually identifiable fact in Western minds..."⁴

However, political considerations were to change this outlook. Islam spread very quickly, and thus quickly grew to threaten Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. The first converts to Islam were the Arabs, a very energetic and hardy race. "...for the first time the warlike peoples of the Arabian Desert had been united by a common faith and by religious authority. In this way Islam contributed the vital factor that made possible the rapid Arabic conquest of the richest provinces of the eastern Roman Empire."⁵ The swift and complete nature of the conquest, combined with the reaction of the local existing Christian population was so striking that the Church began to look very closely at the nature of Islam. There is no doubt the very existence of Islam was the most far-reaching problem facing the medieval Roman Catholic Church.⁶ Pirenne concludes that the eastern Roman Empire was in great peril long before it had any real understanding of what it faced.⁷

Islam provided a challenge for Western Christendom in many ways. First, defeating it would prove very difficult. "It [Islam] was immensely successful... It resisted both conquest and conversion, and it refused to wither away."⁸ The Roman Catholic Church, especially under the leadership of Pope Gregory VII, felt it was destined to be the predominant religion of the world. Therefore Islam must be defeated and thus, Islam was a threat religiously. "The papal policy was to consolidate and universalize the ecclesiastical empire."⁹ Exacerbating this was the basic fact that Islam came from similar roots as Christianity, and "It was resemblance, and not difference, that dominated the dogmatic, liturgical and moral bases of the two religions."¹⁰

However, it was the political issues pertaining to the Islamic world that concerned the Church the most. Islamic power ultimately threatened not only the Holy Land, but also Western Europe itself. Moslem warriors held to a different, sometimes incomprehensible, code of honor than did Western

⁴ R.W. Southern. *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 13.

⁵ Norman F. Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), 133.

⁶ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 3.

⁷ Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, 148.

⁸ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 5.

⁹ James M. Ludlow. *Epochs of Church History, The Age of the Crusades* (New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1896), 5.

¹⁰ Normal Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London: Longman Group, Ltd.), 13.

warriors, but whatever their code of honor, they were skilled warriors using tactics much different from those of either the Byzantine Empire or Western Christendom. For various reasons, including greater technology, the Moslem world was economically strong, and as such affected Christendom in that sphere as well. "Western Christendom and Islam not only represented two distinct systems of religion; they were societies extraordinarily unlike from almost every point of view."¹¹

Islam's quick success, its deep-rooted similarities, its contesting of same areas both over the control of land and the faith of people should have been very alarming. However, despite all of this and despite that respect for the fighting abilities of the Saracens; the Roman Catholic Church underestimated the potential of Islam and wavered on its position towards the Moslems. "From the earliest moments of awareness that the religion of Islam was not a passing phenomenon but a reality to be reckoned with, Western Christendom evinced a range of responses – fear, ridicule, righteous indignation, theological rejection, scholarly inquisitiveness, cultural fascination."¹² To some churchmen, it was truly a heresy. To others, the people of Islam were in many ways just another infidel, categorized and labeled as similar to the Jew, albeit with control of the Holy Land. "Muslims were usually considered infidels, but from the time of John Damascene (675-749) they were often called heretics and Islam a heresy of Christianity."¹³ Peter the Venerable thought Moslems heretics¹⁴, the last and greatest heretics of this world. However, despite both John of Damascus and Peter the Venerable, theologically there was a great deal of debate over the nature and place of Islam in the Christian world. "Was it [Islam] a symptom of the world's last days, or a stage in the Christian development; a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect."¹⁵

A look at the nature of heresy is important here. "A heretic was a dissenter formally condemned by an accepted ecclesiastical authority... The term heretic is distinguished from infidel, one who is not Christian at all."¹⁶ These two definitions from Russell show that the problem of determining the relationship of

¹¹ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 7.

¹² Jane I. Smith, "Old French Travel Accounts of Muslim Beliefs Concerning the Afterlife," In *Christian-Muslim Encounters* ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 221.

¹³ Jeffrey Burton Russell. *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages, The Search for Legitimate Authority* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 3.

¹⁴ Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Russell. *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages*, 3.

Moslem to Christian and shows perhaps why Christian clergy vacillated on its position. For Moslems to be heretics to Christianity they had to be defined as such by the Church, a definition which was late in coming.

It was only in the 13th century that the specific definitions of heresy were created by the Church. Several of the popes in the first half of the century were lawyers by trade, and the nature and detail of canon law expanded during this time. "The canon lawyers' definitions of a heretic included any of the following: one who perverts the sacraments; one who deliberately isolates himself from the Christian community; one who errs in interpreting Scripture; one who founds a new sect; one who believes differently about the articles of faith than the Roman church does; one who publicly and persistently teaches error."¹⁷ Furthermore, the distinction of heretic, infidel, Jew or Moslem during this time began to fade. They began to be lumped together as one unified threat against Christianity. This feeling began to coalesce during the early middle of the 13th century, and a completely unexpected political entity exacerbated and extended this tendency at the end of the century.

The traditional Christian view of Islam is that it was a modified version of the true Christian faith. "The Christian faith was quickly corrupted as Mohammed followed Maurus's abominable and heretical inventions; together they produced a hefty volume, picking and choosing from the Old and New Testaments, put perverting their selections with deliberate obscurity. Thus did Mohammed become the Prophet."¹⁸ It was Maurus, a heretical Arian monk, who instructed Mohammed, who then created Islam himself. In other words, Mohammed, who erred in interpreting Scripture; founded a new sect; believed differently about the articles of faith than the Roman church did; and publicly and persistently taught error, was therefore usually considered a Christian heretic. Furthermore, that traditional Christian view of Mohammed felt that the Moslems worshipped Mohammed as a deity in his own right. "Some Europeans believed that Moslems worshipped Mohammed as a god, but for the most part he was regarded as a heretic."¹⁹ It was only later in the Middle Ages, after the First Crusade in the 12th and 13th centuries that a better understanding of the actual nature of Islam began to appear in Western writing. Even so, much was fanciful and fantastic in these writings, which show in the *Song of Roland* and its ascription of an unholy trinity to Islam. "We can say that the Western view of

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸ Kenneth Meyer Setton. *Western Hostility to Islam and Prophecies of Turkish Doom* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1992), 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

Islam... was based on a good deal of sound knowledge, but that is also accepted much that now seems nonsense."²⁰

Worse yet, the very concept of Western writing pertaining to Islam as an offshoot to Christianity was insulting. Moslems felt, justifiably, that Islam was a religion of its own. It was not merely an offshoot of anything. The merest fact that Christian writers viewed Islam only through a Christian lens was denigrating to the Moslem faith. This is a trend that has continued up to the latter part of the 20th century, but one which is now changing. "But many Christians have turned away from any such trend and have embarked upon thoughtful attempts to take Islam seriously on its own terms instead of 'recognized' it in ways-by a Christian 'acceptance' of it as an early (or proto-) stage of the biblical revelation or as an offshoot of Christianity-that are in direct conflict with its own sense of identity."²¹ This viewpoint, however, of studying Islam through Christianity was to play a large role in the ultimate failure of Christian academics in their attempts to convince Moslems of the truth of the Christian faith.

To the Moslems, these Christian assumptions were completely not true. Mohammed was not a deity; he was the final prophet in the chain including Moses, Abraham and Jesus. Furthermore, the nature of the divinity of Christ was antithetical to the basic monotheism of Islam. The belief that Jesus is part of a trinity was to Moslems polytheism,²² and monotheism is the primary tenet of Islam. "In the matter of the Trinity, for example – the central issue of contention between the two faiths – the Muslims turned to the Qur'an for such verses as that which exhorts the Christians not to exaggerate in what they say about the Messiah, that he was only a messenger of God, a Word conveyed to Mary and a spirit from God."²³ Jesus, therefore, was a very important worthy religious figure and worthy of respect. However, as with Mohammed, he was not a deity in his own right, merely a prophet of God.

Christendom struggled with this concept, of course, and thus the similarities underlying the two religions caused problems determining the place of Islam in the Christian worldview. The Jewish question both affected the nature of

²⁰ Daniel. *Islam and the West*, 271.

²¹ Willem A. Bijlefeld, "Christian-Muslim Studies, Islamic Studies, and the Future of Christian-Muslim Encounters," In *Christian-Muslim Encounters* ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 21.

²² Ludlow. *Epochs of Church History, The Age of the Crusades*, 53.

²³ Wadi Z. Haddad, "A Tenth-Century Speculative Theologian's Refutation of the Basic Doctrines of Christianity: Al-Baqillani (d. AD 1013)," In *Christian-Muslim Encounters* ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 83.

Christendom's reaction to Islam and displayed the nature of the problem in placing Islam properly. On the one hand, they [Jews] were respected as God's chosen people to whom the Old Covenant had been given; on the other hand they were condemned for having rejected the New Covenant."²⁴ Jews were therefore tolerated, but not given a respected place in European society. While persecution towards the Jews existed for centuries in Western Europe, Christendom categorized Jews separately from any other group, including heretics.²⁵ "A striking difference existed between violent action against Jews and heretics. Whereas violence against heretics was more often provoked by the agents of order than by the mob, it was mobs who usually rose against the Jews, often in defiance of pleas for tolerance by bishops."²⁶

Christ's divinity and the nature of the Trinity were just as anathema to the Jew as to the Moslem,²⁷ which therefore tended to equate these two completely different religions in Christian minds. The Jews had long since been reconciled to the Christian mind and Christian rulers handled Moslems in a similar way. "Within Christendom, we have seen already, subject Muslims were tolerated. The approach of canon law was sober and careful. The gloss on Gratian required that Jews and Muslims be recognised as neighbours in the evangelical sense."²⁸

Thus, while we have several clergymen calling Islam a heresy, such as John of Damascus and Peter the Venerable, we have others insisting otherwise and the actions of the Church up to the 13th century also indicated otherwise. Heretical prosecution was much harsher than that against Islam, as shown by a much later example of torture of Christian theologians such as Pedro Ruiz de Alcares in Spain²⁹ and, as mentioned before, the Albigensian Crusade. Even Peter the Venerable, who was quite fervent in his support for the Crusades against Moslem heresy, thought that Christians who turn on their own people were far worse. In Peter's case, it was the nobles whose incessant feuds and raiding caused him and the Abbey of Cluny great harm.³⁰

The Moslem faith was no more monolithic than its Roman Catholic counterparts. In the early Arab empires, opposition to the state frequently took

²⁴ Russell. *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages*. 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁷ Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 134.

²⁸ Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 115.

²⁹ John E. Longhurst. *Erasmus and the Spanish Inquisition, The Case of Juan de Valdes* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1950), 20.

³⁰ Gregory A. Smith, "Sine rege since principe: Peter the Venerable on Violence in Twelfth-Century Burgundy," *Speculum Vol. 77, No. 1* (January 2002): 25.

the form of religions schism.³¹ Shi'a and Sunni sects to this day are at best uneasy companions, and throughout history have had many bloody conflicts. Furthermore, these are just the two primary sects within Islam, there were many more. John of Damascus' work *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* is a discussion between a Moslem and a Christian. In that work, the Moslem says that Saracens considered certain Islamic sects. "This portion of the *Disputatio* reflects clearly the controversy of Orthodox Muslims with the Jahmites and the early Mu'tazilites over those passages in the Qur'an in which God Himself appears to be speaking directly."³² Ultimately, then various offshoots from both religions existed.³³ Religiously, therefore, the nature of the conflict was more complicated than the misconception of East vs. West. Furthermore, the presence of other groups, most notably the Jews in both the Moslem and Christian worlds, as well as the Mongol armies coming from farther east in Asia both added to the energy around the conflict.

The traditional view at the time of the Crusades was Christendom on one side and Islam on the other, was therefore false. It was also false that the conflicts during this era centered solely on religion. In fact, the political and economic differences were often much more important, and thus consistently created situations where Moslem aided Christian and vice versa. "Muslim-Christian conflicts have involved different cultures, different classes, different forms of social, political, and economic organizations."³⁴ This was not a conflict that was between two competing poles, but rather between a myriad of individual groups and nations, each of whom may have favored one pole or the other, but who were more concerned with their individual needs and goals rather than the goals of their religion.

In fact, the literature coming from the 12th century, as shown by the stories of *Cantar del Cid* and the *Song of Roland*, are excellent examples of the importance of political goals as opposed to religious. The Cid fights not for his religion but for plunder, he is a professional warrior. In Spain, Moslem rulers consistently used Christian Spanish mercenaries to help defend their borders.³⁵ Yes, the Cid fights the Moors, but at times allies with them, accepting at one point 3000 marks to fight for a Moslem ruler. At no time is the Cid fighting a

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² Daniel J. Sahas. *John of Damascus on Islam, The 'Heresy of the Ismaelites'* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 115.

³³ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 9.

³⁴ Suad Joseph and Barbara L.K. Pillsbury. *Muslim-Christian Conflicts: Economic, Political, and Social Origins* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), 2-3.

³⁵ Archibald Lewis. *Nomads and Crusaders AD1000-1368* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 35.

Crusade against the Moslem presence nor does the story ever envision a Spain that is not both Spanish and Moorish.³⁶

Written at approximately the same time as the *Cantar del Cid*, the *Song of Roland* is an even better example. The *Song of Roland* is an epic description of betrayal, honor, glory and courage. It is also wholeheartedly Christianity vs. Islam, except that the writing shows the dichotomy of Christian thought towards Islam.

From Balaguet there cometh an Emir;
His form is noble, his eyes are bold and clear,
When on his horse he's mounted in career
He bears him bravely armed in his battle-gear,
And for his courage he's famous far and near;
Were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear.³⁷

This passage and many others like it show that the writer did not despise the Moslem, rather he writes of them with a great deal of respect. In fact, the most despicable character in the story is the Christian Ganelon, who betrays, for political and personal gain, Roland and the Twelve Peers to the Moslems. Throughout *Roland*, the enemies are indeed better dead, but they are generally noble. The difference between 'them' and 'us' is that they serve false gods, and that the devils have their souls.³⁸ For the purposes of the story, this had to be true, as the heroes must have foes worthy of their steel. However, during the time the *Chanson de Roland* was being composed, Crusaders were bringing back tales of the prowess and skill of Moslem warriors. The peerless knight William the Marshal said of Salah ad-Din that he was "a man of acute genius, prompt in arms, and liberal above average."³⁹ The tournaments and feasting held between combatants on the two sides during the siege of Acre are another example of this.

In fact, warriors on each side held each on in such high regard that it was only the differences of their respective religions that separated many of them. In the *Song of Roland*, both sides present each other with the opportunity to live and serve honorably in the opposing faith.⁴⁰ The Christians who conquered Antioch in the First Crusade offered this same opportunity to the Moslem ruler,

³⁶ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 81-82.

³⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers (trans.). *The Song of Roland* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), Passage 72, 87.

³⁸ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁰ Sayers (trans.). *The Song of Roland*, Passage 260, 188.

Kerbogha and his people. His response was to reply in kind, just as Charlemagne does to Baligent in the poem.⁴¹ In both cases, the offers include the opportunity to serve in the highest friendship. In both cases, the offers include the retention of property. In both cases, the offers are rejected, however, the offers show the esteem both sides held of their opponent. Twelfth century clergyman Guibert of Nogent wrote, "The empire of the Parthians, whom we call Turks by the corruption of language, is superior to that of Babylonians not in extent of territory (for it is smaller) but in the military talent, the chivalrous character, and the magnanimity which characterizes its inhabitants."⁴²

Furthermore, the truth underlying the fiction of Roland gives more evidence of the nature of Christian-Moslem conflict. "In the year 777, a deputation of Saracen princes from Spain came to the Emperor Charlemagne to request his assistance against certain enemies of theirs, also of the Moslem faith."⁴³ The truth behind the epic poetry therefore is obviously much different from the Christian-Moslem conflict it discusses. Charlemagne's actual decision to invade northern Spain came not from a religious fervor, but from sheer potential for political and economic gain, the same motives inspiring the Moslem princes to request his aid. In fact, Charlemagne's biographer Einhard relates to us the friendly terms with which Charlemagne had with Harun-al-Rachid, the King of the Persians.⁴⁴ If ever Charlemagne were to have led a Crusade or a religious war it would have been directly to the east where, against the Saxons, was where the primary threat to his kingdom and the greatest opportunity to enlarge that kingdom both awaited.⁴⁵ Thus, while it seems to show the ideal of a monolithic struggle between Christianity and Islam, the *Song of Roland* actually shows the importance of political issues and differences within each side.

There was a long tradition throughout the medieval era of alliances between Moslems and Christians. Charlemagne and El Cid are but two examples, but also the conquest of Sicily by the Normans, who faced forces with both Arab and Christian contingents. There are many more examples, and generally wherever there was political gain available by alliance with members of the opposite religion, it was done so. "Alliances between small Christian states and

⁴¹ Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 117.

⁴² D.C. Munro, "The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades," *Speculum*, Vol. 6, No. 3. (Jul., 1931), 335.

⁴³ Sayers (trans.). *The Song of Roland*, 7.

⁴⁴ Lewis Thorpe (trans.). *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, The Two Lives of Charlemagne* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 70.

⁴⁵ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 51.

Arab forces were essentially haphazard.”⁴⁶ All along, then, political gain outweighed any underlying religious motive. “The willingness of many Christians to make alliances with Arabs should be associated precisely with an indifference to their culture and religion.”⁴⁷

Nor was the Church overly concerned, at least originally, with this. “At first, alliances with Arabs were not made against united ecclesiastical disapproval, as in the crusading period, when popes and councils denounced every suggestion of co-operation; in the ninth century this attitude was only coming into existence.”⁴⁸ It is only in the late 12th and 13th centuries that such cooperation became to be regarded as treacherous to the Christian Church.

However, even when Christian military focus was aimed primarily towards the Moslems, differences arose that prevented a completely unified position. The kingship of Crusader Syria was not a strong monarchy along the lines of Norman England. Rather, the nobles who owed fealty to Baldwin I and his successors were often strong-willed men in their own right, and truly the King of Jerusalem was first among equals. These princes, as the Moslem threat from the east increased, were forced to look to their own defenses first.⁴⁹ Furthermore, not once did the combined forces of all of the fiefdoms in Syria and Palestine ever marshal under a single banner. Various contingents served periodically with other contingents, but never did the whole army of the Crusader states muster for battle.⁵⁰

It was not, though, just the secular rulers of the Crusader states that split the focus, and therefore the monolithic nature of the Crusades. The Church, in order to assist in the Crusades, allowed for the creation of religious knightly orders, in particular the Knights of the Hospital of St. John in Jerusalem and the Knights of the Temple of Solomon, which provided a very skilled ecclesiastical military force in Palestine. Unfortunately, the Hospitallers and the Templars became increasingly powerful, and with their independence, secular control of the military campaign disappeared.⁵¹ The united front needed by the Christians, even in Palestine facing an increasingly dangerous and powerful opponent, did not truly exist.

This is not to say that the Crusades would have succeeded had they remained unified as this is not the case. The Crusaders were vastly

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁹ John Beeler. *Warfare in Feudal Europe, 730-1200*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 126.

⁵¹ Ibid., 128.

outnumbered, as a relatively few Christian nobles went on the Crusades. Many in Europe had seen other options than to travel long distances themselves on such a risky venture. Instead some chose to increase the persecution of the Jews and other non-Christians readily at hand.⁵² This was especially true in Northern Europe, which had been relatively isolated from the threat of Islam for quite some time. Local Jewry was readily available, and if one served God by smiting the infidel Moslem, some reasoned, one would also serve God by smiting the infidel Jew. "It was natural that a vast movement of xenophobic character should be accompanied by manifestations of xenophobia against resident foreigners, and, since the form of xenophobia was religious, the infidel Jews were obvious victims."⁵³

Nor were they able to expect a great deal of assistance from the local population. Moslem occupation had not been extremely difficult upon the Christians in the Holy Land. John of Damascus, whose father had been an important town leader and who was given the freedom to write pro-Christian literature is an example of this, but this happened wherever the Moslems ruled. "...it was inevitable that the temper of the Christian population should become relaxed. This had happened in the end wherever Islam was established, and it was happening in Spain."⁵⁴ Moslem rule was much different than the traditional rule of occupation. Non-Moslems were able to live reasonably well under Moslem rulership, although they faced greater taxes and greater restrictions than the Moslem population. "The great innovation of Islam was to offer a new alternative to the classical tradition of slavery or death; either conversion, which would give full rights to those who accepted it, or submission and toleration."⁵⁵

Furthermore, "In the eighth and ninth centuries the great majority of the Christian populations who lived along the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean went over to this new faith founded by Mohammed. It was a great blow for Christianity that its oldest and most intensive centers were lost to Islam."⁵⁶ Even those Christians who remained were not well-considered by the Crusaders. "The Christian minority was regarded by the Franks as schismatic at best..."⁵⁷ In short, then, the Christians never possessed the political strength and manpower to retain the gains they had achieved in the First Crusade. In the end, that entire host the King of Jerusalem could theoretically field was only

⁵² Russell. *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages*, 40.

⁵³ Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, 122.

⁵⁴ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 21.

⁵⁵ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*. 136.

⁵⁶ Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 135.

⁵⁷ Beeler. *Warfare in Feudal Europe*, 122.

about 1,800 knights and 10,000 infantry.⁵⁸ Even had such an army been fielded, it is difficult to see how effective they could have been against the combined forces of a unified Moslem world directly to their East. This is especially true when one considers the excellent leadership of the Moslems, which peaked with the great Salah-ad-Din. Fulcher, a Christian noble during the Crusades was astonished that so small a kingdom with such few defenders was not attacked.⁵⁹

In fact, they possessed so little strength that it brings up the question how they achieved what few successes they did at all. They originally succeeded because the Islamic world was less monolithic in the 12th century than were the Franks. "So long as the Moslem east was politically fragmented, Frankish commanders, by a display of skill and energy – and great good luck – were able to preserve their foothold on the Syrian coast."⁶⁰ However, when the Moslems did unify under leaders such as Zanki, Nur-ed-Din and Salah-ah-Din Crusader Syria was doomed.

Therefore, despite the Crusades, the concept of monolithic opponents still did not materialize, another example of which comes from the scholars of each side. Saracen technology and learning was very advanced compared to Christian. They did not forget mathematics, astronomy, and medicine that ancient Greek philosophers had worked so hard to learn were not forgotten, as in the West.⁶¹ "Before the end of the twelfth century, there was a very rich current of secular thought in the Islamic world, which made Arabic scholars of the tenth and eleventh centuries the greatest philosophers and scientists of their age."⁶² This hampered the Western Church in several ways. First, it limited its effectiveness in directly fighting the Moslems. Technology may not have meant as much on the battlefield during the Crusades as it did during the Persian Gulf War, but the side possessing better weaponry will always have better chances.

However, the learning gap was much more insidious. "A Spanish Christian writer of the tenth century tells us that many of his younger contemporaries were converting to Islam not only because of their political ambitions but because of the attractions of Arabic literature and culture."⁶³ Undoubtedly, many

⁵⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁹ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*. 137.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁶¹ A.S. Turberville. *Medieval History and the Inquisition* (London: Archon Books, 1964), 59.

⁶² Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 138.

⁶³ Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 135.

of what might have been the brightest Christian scholars were therefore lost to Rome.

Worse yet was the effect that it had upon the remaining Christian scholars. "...Because the western peoples looked upon the Moslems as perverse and pernicious heretics, they closed their eyes to the benefits they could derive from association with the Arabic peoples."⁶⁴ Technological researchers will say that knowing that something can be done is half the battle in learning, but what if those researchers avoid that proof? How often, then, did the simple fact that the Moslems knew something delay that knowledge from its introduction in the West? Furthermore, the Church was suspicious of those places that may have embraced Islamic as well. "In Languedoc, at the schools of Montpellier, Narbonne, Perpignan, Arabian medicine and philosophy flourished."⁶⁵ Admittedly, the example of Languedoc is extreme, and the antipathy held towards that region was primarily due to heresies existing there, but is it a coincidence that heresy was so rampant in these areas as well as Moslem learning? In short, scholars of the Christian world, in order to advance their own learning, had to go against the aims of the Roman Catholic Church. Peter the Venerable provides a striking example here. He commissioned and paid for himself a translation of the Qur'an in order to provide more ammunition in the theological debate against Islam. However, other clergymen met with this project at best with apathy, but at worst with open hostility, this against one of the staunchest opponents of Islam.⁶⁶

The aims of both Churches in their academic activities were primarily to discredit the opposing faith, with many works on both sides published. "This [polemic] literature was shaped and influenced by contacts between Muslims and Christians. Each side sought to demonstrate the truth and superiority of its own doctrines."⁶⁷ Furthermore, both sides looked to the theological writings of their opponent to support their own theses and to defend their own positions."⁶⁸ As noted before, Moslems proved resistant to the various Christian academic arguments, in part because of the arrogant viewpoint by Christian scholars in their works about Islam.

Interestingly enough, at least in Spain, these very attempts to discredit the other religion resulted in perhaps too much familiarity of these scholars for the opposing faith. "Even the religious wars in Palestine did not breed exclusively

⁶⁴ Cantor. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 140.

⁶⁵ Turberville, *Medieval History and the Inquisition*, 62.

⁶⁶ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 38-39.

⁶⁷ Haddad. "A Tenth-Century Speculative Theologian's Refutation of the Basic Doctrines of Christianity, 82.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

antagonism to the faith of the infidel, and friendly intercourse with Saracen Spain and academic interest in Islamic philosophy produced a knowledge that was less critical than sympathetic.⁶⁹ "...there is a long period in which Spanish influence [over the Islam question] was very varied but almost wholly rational and beneficent."⁷⁰ Obviously later, during the Inquisition, this drastically changes, but it is interesting to note the tolerance and exchange of ideas prior to the Inquisition in that divided state.

Economically, as well, Western Europe suffered in comparison to the Saracens. The amount of trade during the early centuries with the Islamic world was not huge, as Islam's primary trading partners were Byzantium, Kievan Rus, and sub-Saharan Africa, but nonetheless there was some trade going on. In fact, it is likely that the balance of trade in many crucial items favored Western Europe.⁷¹ However, the economic practices and strength of the Islamic world was tremendous. Many Europeans looked with great interest at the trading procedures of Islam, and it is possible that the great trading states of Italy developed where they did is not coincidental. "...And those [merchants] of Amalfi and Venice who were much influenced by the more advanced trading practices which were to be found in the Islamic and Byzantine worlds."⁷²

The nature of Islam made it, as mentioned before, difficult for Christian missionaries to achieve conversion. Unlike the pagans with whom the Christians had had so much success, Moslems had a strong religion with a solid foundation of theology with which to cling to. Friar Eleemosyna, a Franciscan missionary, noted with disappointment how little success in conversion Christians were able to achieve in Tunis during the 13th and 14th centuries.⁷³ This despite a treaty with the King of Tunis allowing these missionaries the freedom to make their case to the Tunisian populace. In fact, as we have seen with the Christians of Syria and Palestine, Islam possessed a distinct advantage in its ability to achieve converts.

This was never so important as with the case of the Mongols. The Mongol invasion was worrisome enough to Western Europe, however, the Roman Catholic church saw a great deal of hope in their arrival. First, the arrival of the Mongols brought word that there were groups of Christians, the Nestorians, living in the East. Second, and more importantly, there was the hope that Christian missionaries might be able to convert the Mongols to Christianity, thereby gaining a tremendously powerful new ally in their goal, which still

⁶⁹ Turberville. *Medieval History and the Inquisition*, 73.

⁷⁰ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 19.

⁷¹ Lewis. *Nomads and Crusaders*, 39.

⁷² Lewis. *Nomads and Crusaders*, 80.

⁷³ Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 119.

remained, of spreading Christianity across the world. Raymond Lull said: "If the schismatics [the Nestorians] are brought into the fold and the Tartars converted, all the Saracens can easily be destroyed."⁷⁴ Nor were these hopes completely far-fetched. Christian emissaries, such as William of Rubroek, visited Karakorum, the seat of Genghis Khan and were well received. "...the Mongols gave a glimpse of an outer world which might be deployed against the Muslim Arabs."⁷⁵ William, for example, returned home claiming to have successfully defended Christianity in a debate consisting of representatives from the Latin Church, Nestorian Christians, Islam, and Buddhism.⁷⁶ Also, later Khans looked with some concern at the expansion of Persian Moslems in their direction.⁷⁷

However, the great fears of the Western Church were realized late in the 13th century, when under the leadership of Khans Berke and Tuda-Mengu, the entire Golden Horde converted to Islam. The threat inherent to the Catholic Church with the entirety of the Golden Horde turning to Islam is obvious, and Christians such as Ricoldo da Montecroce and Raymond Lull both watched the process of the Horde's conversion with great concern.⁷⁸

The conversion of the Mongols increased the threat from the East and increased the hatred and fear of Islam and its people towards the end of the 13th century, and the attitudes towards learning during this time are evidence of this. "The hospitable reception of Islamic philosophy which had marked the middle years of the thirteenth century gave way increasingly to suspicion and xenophobia."⁷⁹ Thus, the political threat to Western Christendom provided by the frightening armies of the Mongols drastically changed Western thought.

A last point to be made in the role of politics in Catholic-Moslem relations comes from the situation existing at the time of Urban II's call for the First Crusade. There were three crucial events occurred prior to 1095 that made it even possible. One was the defeat by Pope Gregory VII of the German emperors. This gave the Popes greater political freedom than ever before. Second was the success of Norman adventurers in Sicily, and the Kingdom of Two Sicilies provided a strong strategic starting point to expand Christian power to the east and south. Third was the utter defeat of Byzantium at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 by the Moslems. The Byzantine Empire had always provided a bulwark against the Islamic threat, and it was widely considered prior to

⁷⁴ Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 68.

⁷⁵ Daniel. *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*. 322.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-51.

⁷⁷ Janet Martin. *Medieval Russia 980-1584*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 144.

⁷⁸ Southern. *Western Views of Islam*, 68-69.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

Manzikert that Western Europe was safe because of the existence of that empire. However, this defeat was so total that the strategic reliance of Byzantium had to be reconsidered, the West from that point on felt it had to rely on its own strength to defend against the Moslem threat.⁸⁰ These political issues, combined with a variety of societal issues, provided Urban II with the chance to expand Christendom's power with the use of the Crusades. Political factors provided for political opportunities.

Whatever else, therefore, the overall response of Christendom to Islam was mixed. The reaction from the papacy varied from pope to pope, as shown by the direct diplomacy of Gregory VII with Islamic rulers less than two decades prior to the preaching of the Crusades by Urban II in 1096.⁸¹ The reaction of various rulers and nobles were just as mixed, but their primary concern remained the opportunity to acquire power and riches.

Was Islam a Christian heresy? Yes, later definitions of canon law made the defining of Islam a heresy simple. However, Islam, whether it was a heresy or not, was treated in some cases similar to Christendom's treatment of the Jews and in some cases as a heresy and in some cases as merely another player in the political arena. Overall, however, any examination of Islam must put forth the result that the political factors outweighed the religious factors in the minds of European rulers, both secular and ecclesiastical, through the 13th century. Heresy it may have been, a vast political force it definitely was.

⁸⁰ Lewis. *Nomads and Crusaders*, 99.

⁸¹ Norman Daniel. *Islam and the West, The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1962), 114.